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**Democratisation and political regimes in de facto states:
A comparative analysis of levels of freedom and fairness in
parliamentary elections in Abkhazia (2022) and South Ossetia
(2019)**

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Abstract

Over the past 30 years, Abkhazia and South Ossetia's remarkable endurance has made them well-known cases on the list of de facto states. They have held regular elections, adopting an organisation that mimics that of recognised states, with a political arena invested by candidates nominated by parties and regulated by monitoring bodies, all within a legal framework. However, notwithstanding their notable similarities, the two de facto states would appear to have developed two very different ways of doing politics. While Abkhazia seems to have displayed evidence of a genuine political life, South Ossetia has espoused a "façade" regime, with ostensibly democratic bodies that in reality conceal an authoritarian style of rule. The research question underlying this study is therefore as follows: how is it to be explained that Abkhazia has apparently developed genuine democratic features, whereas they appear to be merely a façade in South Ossetia?

This research falls within the scope of the literature on de facto states and is intended to fill a theoretical gap with domestic issues that are still under-addressed in favour of macro issues. Furthermore, this research has integrated the literature on democratisation and political regimes originally applied to recognised states, insofar as many de facto states have shown similar operating features.

Drawing upon a comparative case study of the levels of freedom and fairness during the latest parliamentary elections in Abkhazia (2022) and South Ossetia (2019), and supported by the results of eight semi-structured interviews, this research aimed first of all at providing an initial discussion of the type of political regime in force in these two de facto states. Preliminary results have demonstrated that Abkhazia has adopted a hybrid form of regime, and that the concept of competitive authoritarian regime would seem to be more appropriate than that of ethnocracy, which has long been attributed to it. As regards South Ossetia, the elections revealed a total lack of freedom and fairness, favouring the hypothesis of a fully authoritarian regime. The second part of this research enabled the identification of seven potential factors to explain the discrepancies of the two de facto regimes types : the geography of the territory (F1), the state of the economy (F2), the Soviet legacy (F3), nationalism (F4), patron state interference (F5), international aid for the development of civil society (F6) and independence aspirations (F7). From a theoretical point of view, this research has shed light on an essential aspect of the political life of de facto states: elections. Furthermore, it has paved the way for future research into the question of political regimes and how literature applied to recognised states can provide valuable assistance. From a practical point of view, this research has confirmed the difficulty of such an enterprise, where methodological obstacles must not give rise to superficial applications of democratic factors, calling for semantic and scientific prudence.

Finally, this research paves the way for further discussion on the façade of the South Ossetian regime, the components of which seem to reveal a more complex reality, while the increased unfairness of elections in Abkhazia seems to nuance the eulogies about its democratic nature, stressing the importance of not considering political regimes as immutable entities, but as constantly fluctuating on the political regime continuum.

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Introduction

In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, fifteen new, independent republics came into being and were recognised by the international community. Simultaneously, several wars of secession resulted in the emergence of five entities which were denied de jure international recognition - Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These entities declared independence from their state of origin, known as the "parent state", before seeking the support of a protector state, known as the "patron state". More recently, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics declared their independence from Ukraine in 2014. Despite the original five's lack of international legal recognition, they have shown remarkable endurance over the last thirty years, as only Chechnya was reabsorbed by its parent state, Russia. Studied and classified as "de facto states", a whole new literature set itself the task of investigating the emergence and, later, the consolidation of this phenomenon. The term "de facto state" remains far from eliciting an academic consensus (Caspersen & Stansfield, 2010; Broers & al, 2015; Kolstø, 2022), as evidenced by the proliferation of adjectives used to qualify these entities: "separatist states" (Lynch, 2002), "unrecognised states" (King, 2011; Caspersen, 2008; 2011) or "puppet state" (Ivanel, 2015). In 1998, Pegg stated that there is a de facto state when there is "an organized political leadership which has risen to power through some degree of indigenous capability; receives popular support; and has achieved sufficient capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a defined territorial area, over which effective control is maintained for an extended period of time." Furthermore, a de facto state "views itself as capable of entering into relations with other states and it seeks full constitutional independence and widespread international recognition as a sovereign state", however it is "unable to achieve any degree of substantive recognition and therefore remains illegitimate in the eyes of international society" (Pegg, 1998). Not long after, in 2006, Kolstø offered a revised definition by specifying that the entity must control "most of the territory it lays claim to", and favouring the term quasi-state, which he recently abandoned since it was only "highlighting their deficiencies" (Kolstø, 2022). In attempting to navigate this semantic debate, this present research adheres to the commonly agreed terminology of "de facto state" and builds on the evidence proposed by Pegg, even though more comprehensive definitions were thoroughly consulted to enrich this study.

The Republic of Georgia is the only post-Soviet state with two de facto territories - Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Their quest for independence gave rise to violent clashes (1992-93 in Abkhazia and 1991-92 in South Ossetia), pitting the secessionist forces, supported by Russia and North Ossetia, against Georgian forces. The after-effects of these conflicts are evident today, as fears of a return to

hostilities linger in both Georgia proper and the de facto states themselves. Having declared their independence in 1992, South Ossetia and Abkhazia gained recognition from Russia following the 2008 war with Georgia, but remain unrecognised by most of the international community. Whilst considerable research has been conducted into the development of nation and state-building in Abkhazia (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008; Bakke & al, 2014; Kopeček & al, 2017;), including more in-depth studies on its domestic political life (Ó Beacháin, 2012; 2015; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2013; Kopeček & al, 2016), there remains less investigation into South Ossetia, whose very status as a de facto state is currently under debate (German, 2016; Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012), as some view the entity as a puppet state. South Ossetia has been portrayed as being entirely dependent on its patron state, Russia, which not only provides it with economic resources and security but is also partially in charge of its state apparatus, thus calling into question the presence of a statehood independent of any external force. Conversely, Abkhazia, although greatly dependent on Russia, has nurtured an ethno-nationalism embodied in a state project "by the Abkhaz for the Abkhaz", where the national consensus's quest for independence has paved the way for a political life with many democratic features.

This present research therefore seeks to examine the domestic political life of these two de facto states. The aim is to fill a theoretical gap, given that domestic issues have been less explored in favour of macro studies on the quest for international recognition (Berg & Toomla, 2009; Caspersen & Stansfield, 2010; Berg & Ker-Lindsay, 2018), relations with the patron state (German, 2012; 2016, Gerrits & Bader, 2016; Ambrosio & A. Lange, 2016; Kolstø, 2020; Blakkisrud, Kemoklidze, Gelashvili & Pål Kolstø, 2021) or mere survival (Florea, 2017; Berg & Vits, 2018), but above all to pave the way for a new discussion on political regimes in de facto states and their discrepancies. After thirty years of independence, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have undeniably embraced a political life with the holding of regular parliamentary and presidential elections. These elections are monitored by various bodies, and a more or less sincere political competition occurs in a political arena featuring distinct candidates and political parties. Yet it is striking how differently their political lives have unfolded, despite the fact that the two de facto states share many common features - the same parent and patron states, both born out of violent conflict in the 1990s, and both having made historical claims for independence. While Abkhazia has been lauded for its so-called competitive elections, and a sincere desire to democratise (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2008; 2013; Ó Beacháin, 2012; 2015; Kopeček & al, 2016), South Ossetia has opted for a mere façade of democracy where threats and arbitrary exclusion from the political arena are commonplace. These discrepancies were even reflected in the labelling of their de facto political regimes: Abkhazia, commonly referred to as an ethnocracy (Popescu, 2006; O' Loughlin & al, 2011; Bakke & al, 2014;

Ó Beacháin, 2015; Kopeček & al, 2017) and South Ossetia as a closed semi-authoritarian society (de Waal, 2019). According to Freedom House, Abkhazia is "partly free" ([Freedom House, 2022](#)), and South Ossetia "not free" ([Freedom House, 2022](#)). Nevertheless, both officially claim to have a democratic political system.

The research question underlying this study is therefore as follows: how is it to be explained that Abkhazia has apparently developed genuine democratic features, whereas they appear to be merely a façade in South Ossetia?

To carry out this research, it was decided to focus on an essential criterion in purportedly democratic regimes: the holding of free and fair elections. This criterion alone cannot justify the democratic aspect of a regime, when today even dictators hold elections (Schedler, 2015). Nevertheless, its occurrence is essential. This criterion was chosen primarily for its theoretical importance, but also for methodological reasons. The inability to conduct research in the de facto territories would have made assessing other criteria that have come to symbolise a democratic system much more difficult: such as the presence of a free civil society or the level of accountability of political leaders. The elections, on the other hand, have previously been analysed by several researchers who have provided a solid scientific basis.

With the aim of producing a more accurate study, this research assessed the degree of freedom and fairness of the most recent parliamentary elections in Abkhazia (2022) and South Ossetia (2019). The parliamentary elections are worth examining in that they provide an opportunity to dissect key aspects of political life which are currently under-analysed in the de facto states: the nature and organisation of political parties, the importance of the voting system or the electorate's demands.

This research seeks to highlight possible explanations for the different political paths taken by South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It offers an opportunity to apply the literature on hybrid regimes to de facto states, and to abandon the paradigm of democratic transition, which has encouraged an overly loose application of the criteria of democracy (Diamond, 2002), obscuring major abuses. Lastly, this research encourages discussion on the labelling of political regimes in de facto states, questioning the need to create a typology that would take into account several elements specific to de facto states, such as the possible interference of a patron state, the parent state's efforts to deligitimise political life or the lack of international recognition.

This research is a small-n design. It is a comparative case study based on John Stuart Mill's Most Similar System Design (MSSD). This research is based on eight semi-structured interviews with researchers and international experts based in Georgia and abroad, as well as secondary sources of information. It is supported by literature on de facto states, democratisation, hybrid regimes and monographs on the history of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia. This dissertation is structured into four chapters. The first provides a review of the literature and details the methodology and method adopted. The second dissects the parliamentary elections. The third analyses the level of freedom and fairness of the elections, offering an initial discussion of the labelling of the regimes. The final chapter sets out seven hypotheses to explain the political divergences adopted. The conclusion provides a summary of the results and invites discussion on further research.

I. Literature review

“The territorial separatists of the early 1990s have become the state builders of the early 2000s” (King, 2001). In many respects, de facto states share numerous characteristics with those that are recognised. They perform the same type of core functions, from the collection and redistribution of resources to the performance of a political life. They "have acquired the attributes of real states – from constitutions and cabinets to police and military forces” (International Alert, 2004). They have consolidated political structures and hold regular elections with similar mechanisms of those in recognised states with a political arena featuring candidates represented by parties. Researchers have identified and assessed de facto political regimes using well-known definitional criteria that had long been applied to recognised states, from democracy indexes (e.g. Freedom House) alongside occasional explicit comparisons with recognised states, such as the Abkhazian presidential system which had been described “in the style of the hyper-centralised model common in the former Soviet Union” (Ó Beacháin, 2015).

These functional equivalences have also materialised with the political transitions that have taken place since the fall of the USSR. The “processes of democratic transition are not unique to established states” (Tansey, 2007), when several de facto states have undergone significant bouts of democratisation since the beginning of the 21st century. Such research initially focused on the post-conflict transition towards the establishment of a statehood, with the political regime serving first and foremost as an element of legitimacy for the new de facto leaders (von Steinsdorff & Fruhstorfer, 2012; Bakke & al, 2014), up to a performative assessment in a context of struggle for recognition and great insecurity (Berg & Mölder, 2012). Furthermore, despite significant episodes of democratisation or autocratic consolidation, the de facto states have confirmed the limits of the democratic transition paradigm by consolidating hybrid forms of regimes. Vincenc Kopeček (2017) has, for instance, labelled Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh as “competitive authoritarianisms”.

The literature on democratic transition and political regimes in recognised states thus provides a solid basis on which to begin this research.

A. From the paradigm of democratic transition to the theorisation of hybrid regimes

The literature on democratic transition has been shaped by the various waves of democratisation in the modern era, even though the first writings on democracy and regime date back to ancient Greece. In *The Republic*, Book 8, Plato described the transition from one political regime to another: the “perfect” regime of aristocracy to one of tyranny (Leroux, 2016). According to Samuel Huntington (1991), the first wave of democratisation began in the 1820s, when the right to vote was widely extended to white men in the United States. After a "reverse wave" with Mussolini's accession to power in 1922, the second wave of democratisation began with the Allied victory in the the Second World War. Following a second "reverse wave" between the 1960s and 1975, the third wave of democratisation began. According to Huntington, this period lasted from 1974 to 1990, and “at least 30 countries made transitions to democracy, just about doubling the number of democratic governments in the world” (Ibid). The third wave of democratisation was marked by significant improvements in civil liberties and political participation, particularly in South America.¹

Whilst solid democracies were mainly to be found in the West, the 1990s and 2000s saw the propagation of new democracies, albeit “democratic only in the electoral sense” (Schedler, 2015). These differences soon rekindled debate, and critics of the paradigm of “transition” – which implied the conversion from a weak authoritarian regime to a more or less shaky democracy – flourished. In the wake of the collapse of the USSR, literature on democratic transition found itself struggling to identify “what distinguishes democracies from autocracies, and how to distinguish different kinds of democracies from one another” (Møller & Skaaning, 2013). Michael McFaul spoke of a fourth wave of democratisation (McFaul, 2002), given how different the regimes were that resulted from the collapse of the USSR compared to those of the previous wave, yet McFaul stuck to the concept of transition “to democracy and dictatorship” (Ibid). The dilemma provoked by the transition theory is that it does not consider the infinite possibilities on the continuum from democracy to autocracy. Whilst O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead emphasised the “inherent uncertainty and variation in the outcomes of regime transitions” (O'Donnell & al, 1986 quoted in Diamond, 2002), the authors, however, favoured the transition paradigm and only raised the different possibilities of the two poles on the continuum, with a transition that can end either with “a democracy, (...) or a restrictive, illiberal democracy” (Ibid). Yet how can one explain that some regimes meet the criteria of both democracy and autocracy?

¹ During this period, other typologies arose. One such example is that of Dahl (1971), who described the West's transition from “hegemonies and competitive oligarchies” during the 19th century, to “near-polyarchies” before the First World War, and finally to “full-polyarchies” as the result of rapid democratic development following the Great Depression, only interrupted by the Second World War.

In the aftermath of the fall of the USSR, several authors denounced this overuse of the transition paradigm (Diamond, 2002; Bunce, 2003; Hale, 2005; Roessler & Howard, 2006; Schedler, 2015) to the point of speaking of “The End of the Transition Paradigm” (Carothers, 2002). Indeed, many dictatorships did not become electoral democracies, but rather regimes with “the electoral facades of liberal democracy, yet violated democratic principles in severe and systematic ways” (Schedler, 2015). Henry E. Hale (2005) for instance, spoke of "cycles" rather than transitions, and believed that the fall of the USSR – and even the liberalisation policies launched by Gorbachev in the 1980s – re-oriented the discussion in three directions. One school of thought gradually abandoned the concept of democratisation to focus more on the reasons behind the adoption of a particular regime; another sought to focus more on the case of regimes whose transition led not to democracy, but to autocracy; and the third developed a literature on "hybrid regimes" which “fall into the political gray zone . . . between full fledged democracy and outright dictatorship” (Diamond, 2002). This rejection of the transitional paradigm gave rise to new efforts to redefine democracy, which involved associating a variety of adjectives with the term in an attempt to specify it. For regimes equidistant between the two extremes of the continuum, researchers have used the terms “pseudo-democracy,” “semi-democracy,” or “semi-authoritarianism” (Schedler, 2015). Others have sought to highlight the paradox of autocratic regimes whose holding of elections challenges, or even renders impossible their labelling as democracies, thus preferring to speak about “hybrid”, “mixed”, or “inconsistent” regimes (Ibid). It is equally important to note that in some cases, the process of adopting a regime type remains a game of oscillation on the continuum with "democracy on one end and dictatorship on the other” (Roessler & Howard, 2006) and is not rooted in an immutable logic, quite specific to the post-communist space.

Since the late 1990s, researchers in comparative politics have been working on a titanic new project: theorising the regimes in the "foggy zone between liberal democracy and closed authoritarianism” (Schedler, 2002) in the post-communist transition (Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Carothers, 2002; Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Ottaway 2003). These hybrid regimes are the result of the breakdown of the various criteria defining democracy and autocracy, combined with each other to give rise to various labels such as “electoral authoritarianism” (Schedler, 2006), “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky & Way, 2002), “near polyarchies” (Dahl, 1971), and “semidemocratic” regimes (Diamond, Linz, & Lipset, 1889 quoted in Diamond, 2002). Hybrid regimes “lack an arena of contestation sufficiently open, free, and fair so that the ruling party can readily be turned out of power if it is no longer preferred by a plurality of the electorate” (Diamond, 2002), and for the opposition to win, the latter would require strong “unity, skill, and heroism far beyond what would normally be required for victory in a democracy” (Ibid). However, it is not “a

mere half-way category” (Hale, 2010). Today, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia are classified as such. To explain their emergence, several criteria have been noted– such as their size, the nature of their economy or the surrounding powers – and will be examined in Chapter 4.

Yet the situation resulted in “blurred boundaries” with “authoritarianism with adjectives in addition to democracy with adjectives” (Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011). These attempts at over-labelling have sometimes undermined the primary objective of providing a clear definition of these new regimes. David Collier and Steven Levitsky (1997) warn of what they call “conceptual stretching”, the result of a desire on the part of scholars “to increase analytic differentiation in order to capture the diverse forms of democracy that have emerged”. The authors draw attention to the confusion this can create, with ill-defined terms that often mean the same thing, calling for a return to the semantic origins of democracy.

B. Democratisation in de facto states: where do we stand?

David Collier and Steven Levitsky's call for the careful use of adjectives can quite simply be applied to the literature on de facto states which has attempted, sometimes clumsily, to define the political regimes operating in these entities. In fact, these polities are subject to unique influences, essential to defining their regime – such as the influence of the patron state on the holding of free and fair elections – yet not fully theorised by the literature on democracy. Several authors have stressed the importance of a self-governing regime without external action and/or unelected actors such as the army or the Church, but the patron state has the particularity of providing almost entirely for the economic and security needs of some de facto states, rendering it indispensable. Although the impact of patron state relations on de facto state politics has been reasonably debated (Matsuzato, 2008; Geldenhuys, 2009; Komakhia, 2017), Direnç Kanol's contribution is particularly relevant in that he has gone so far as to propose a type of political regime that considers this unique criterion to the de facto state, speaking of “tutelary democracy” (Kanol, 2015). In exchange “for military and economic help”, “patron states demand control of the decision-making process in de facto states” (Ibid).

Before addressing the literature on democratisation in de facto states, it should first be noted that the domestic issues relevant to de facto states remain under-explored, with a focus instead placed primarily on their relations with the patron state (German, 2012; 2016, Gerrits & Bader, 2016; Ambrosio & A. Lange, 2016, Kolstø, 2020; Blakkisrud & al, 2021), with the international community in their quest for legal recognition (Berg & Toomla, 2009; Caspersen & Stansfield,

2010; Berg & Ker-Lindsay, 2018), the conflicts from which they were born (Potier, 2001; de Waal, 2003; Lynch, 2004; Nona & Pirozzi, 2008; Kopeček & al, 2017), or questions relating to their survival (Florea, 2017; Berg & Vits, 2018). This abundance of macro-scale studies can be partly accounted for by the origin of these entities, following violent conflicts, most of which are still frozen and directly challenge their survival; but also for methodological reasons, with the difficulty of accessing the research field. Nevertheless, a sizeable body of literature has focused on state-building in de facto states, explained in particular by their recent emergence and especially their quest for legitimacy to transition from "war-makers" to "state-makers" (Bakke & al, 2018) by ensuring economic, security and political guarantees (Pegg, 1998; King, 2001; Lynch, 2004; Berg and Mölder, 2012; Bakke et al, 2014) to meet the criteria of the Montevideo Convention (1933). Nevertheless, scholars have failed to reach a consensus on the statehood of de facto states, with some acknowledging their ability to establish themselves as states (King, Pegg), and others highlighting their deficiencies (Lynch, Kolstø). The literature of statehood applied to these new entities has, however, made it possible to challenge well-established criteria designed for legally recognised states. Scott Pegg, for instance, in his definition of de facto states, takes up the Montevideo criteria, highlighting the fourth point by saying that a de facto state "views itself as capable of entering into relations with other states" (Pegg, 1998), and many have indeed engaged with recognised states (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Pegg's definition demonstrated that de facto states have given new impetus to the concept of statehood by rejecting its immutability and calling for more in-depth studies on the types of regime.

Hence, the issue of statehood implies the very question of "government", another requirement of the Montevideo Convention, and by extension the political regime that derives from it. The literature on democratisation and the conceptualisation of political regimes has been only partially applied to de facto states. It has been theorised more as a means for the latter to gain recognition from Western states (Broers, 2005; Caspersen, 2008; 2011; 2012; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2012; 2013, Özpek, 2014; Voller, 2015) or as related to their secessionist agenda and how such an agenda held back democratisation where fear and insecurity gave rise to authoritarian practices (Lynch, 2004; Protsyk, 2009). The question thus arose whether these entities could even pretend to establish a certain type of regime if they were not recognised by the international community and therefore unable to satisfy all the criteria of statehood. Whilst for Linz and Stepan (1996) recognition of state sovereignty is a prerequisite for democracy, many authors have argued otherwise (Tansey, 2007; 2011, Ó Beacháin, 2015). Among them, Donnacha Ó Beacháin argues that "while most countries may not accept their legitimacy, they nonetheless persist and have now developed identifiable regime types and means of governance" (Ó Beacháin, 2015), to even labelling their regime as

“proto-democracy” (Caspersen, 2008), “multi-ethnic democracy” (Matsuzato, 2008), “ethnocracy” (O’ Loughlin & al, 2011), “competitive authoritarianism” (Kopeček, 2017), “hybrid political regimes” (Protsyk, 2009), or “failed authoritarianism” (Popescu, 2006). The first impression here lies in what Levitsky and Way described as “conceptual stretching”, with the use of a variety of sometimes unclear labels to define the same de facto state. Abkhazia, for instance, has been defined as a multi-ethnic democracy (Matsuzato, 2008), an ethnocracy (Ó Beacháin, 2015; Broers & al, 2015; Kopeček & al, 2016) and a competitive authoritarian regime (Kopeček, 2017). The three labels differ semantically, placing Abkhazia at opposite ends of the political regime continuum. Whereas a multi-ethnic democracy acknowledged the democratic aspect of the regime, ethnocracy, defined as “a regime facilitating the expansion, ethnicization and control of contested territory and state by a dominant ethnic nation” (Yiftachel & Ghanem, 2004), refuted it.² The consequences of labelling are not to be taken lightly given that these states seek to engage with Western democracies, often for the sake of survival.

Once again, the general assessment points to the same impasse evoked earlier with the “transition paradigm”. De facto states have largely been observed as weak entities ravaged by destructive conflicts trying to transition to democracy, but too little attention has been paid to explaining the persistence of democratic factors, or why some de facto states have democratised more than others. For instance, while some researchers justified democratisation in part as a means of gaining international recognition, after the 2003 “standards before status” policy culminating in the recognition of Kosovo in 2008, Abkhazia continued to hold elections whose level of competitiveness was repeatedly acknowledged (Popescu, 2006; Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2008; 2013; Ó Beacháin, 2012; 2015 Kopeček & al, 2016), despite its pragmatic realisation that the state itself would not be recognised in the near future. Whilst for some scholars democratisation “remained a facade” (Voller, 2015), others have highlighted fragile but sincere democratic developments, most notably in Kosovo (Tansey, 2007; 2011), in Abkhazia (Caspersen, 2008; Ó Beacháin, 2015) and in Nagorno-Karabakh (Broers, 2005; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012). Despite the paucity of analysis on domestic policies, some authors have attempted to provide certain keys to understanding the development of more or less democratic regimes, such as the relationship with nationalism (Caspersen, 2008), the desire to adopt a different regime from that of the parent state giving rise to “competitive democratization” (Broers, 2005), or the importance of ethnicity in shaping the political playing field (Clogg, 2008; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2013; Comai, 2013; Dembińska, 2019). Finally, few authors have had the opportunity to share their work on the popular perception of the

² The authors do, however, differentiate “Ethnocracy” from “Open ethnocracy”, to define a regime which, although privileging one ethnic group over the others, “possess a range of partial democratic features, most notably political competition, free media and significant civil rights”.

political regime, primarily for methodological reasons. John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolosov and Gerard Toal are among the few authors to have asked their respondents what they considered to be the best form of political regime in Abkhazia (2011).

Furthermore, although many studies have drawn a correlation between elections and democracy, indirectly applying a minimalist definition of the latter, this poses a number of problems: the assessment of popular support is arduous, if not outright impossible, due to a watchful population that cannot oppose certain ideas such as independence; the media and television are often under considerable state censorship; and the reports of "observers" sent to monitor elections are generally biased.³ Therefore, assessing the state of democracy in de facto states requires great prudence, and any conclusions must be the result of thorough research backed by the literature on regime types and augmented by the specificities of the polities themselves. My argument is that a minimalist definition of democracy does not work for these particular polities since resources for assessing the competitiveness of elections are too uncertain and not easily obtainable.

Finally, it should be stressed that studies of domestic policies in de facto states have been unevenly conducted, mainly for reasons of access to the field. Whilst Abkhazia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria have been favourable to empirical research and sometimes seen as an additional source of legitimacy for their statehood, South Ossetia has only been partially studied as access is available solely via the Russian border from Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia,⁴ but also because the territory, due to Russia's considerable influence, has sometimes seen its de facto state status widely debated, with observers preferring the term "puppet state".⁵ Although most studies have dealt with its relationship with Russia (Karagiannis, 2014; Gerrits & Bader, 2016; Hoch, 2019) several authors have nevertheless written about the quality of its statehood (Toal & O'Loughlin, 2013) or the conduct of elections (Hoch, 2022). However, further research is needed.

³ See "[Database of politically biased election observers](#)" from the European Platform for Democratic Elections".

⁴ In 2010, Gerard Toal & John O'Loughlin (2013), after several months of negotiations, succeeded in convincing the Tskhinvali authorities to allow their survey to be conducted by the Professor Khasan Dzutsev of the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences center in Vladikavkaz (North Ossetia).

⁵ For a typology of the different terminologies used, see: Kolstø, Pål. 'What's in a Name? "De Facto States", Terminological Choices and Normative Consequences'. *Pathways to Peace and Security*, no. 1 (2022): 30–46. University of Oslo. <https://doi.org/10.20542/2307-1494-2022-1-30-46>.

C. Political transition in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in a nutshell

The transition paradigm has been extended, in varying degrees, to the de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Firstly, while Abkhazia has a genuine “state project” (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2013), South Ossetian leaders “do not take the idea of a South Ossetian state seriously” (de Waal, 2019). In Abkhazia, since its declaration of independence in 1992, a “shift towards establishing a more democratic society has taken place” (Kopeček, 2017), with the “gradual transition away from rule by authoritarian war heroes towards some form of proto-democracy” (Caspersen, 2008). The transition has been greatly motivated by the “democratization-for-recognition” strategy, as the literature thoroughly documented the emergence of democratic institutions and the regular holding of elections (Popescu, 2006; Berg & Mölder 2012; Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2012; Ó Beacháin 2012; 2015; Kopeček & al, 2016). The beginning of the democratic transition can be traced back to 2004, when the resignation of President Ardzinba opened the political arena to new oppositional forces. Nevertheless, Abkhazia is “still far from Western liberal democracies” (Kopeček, 2017). Defined as an ethnocracy, Abkhazia has continually reinforced its vision of a state for the Abkhaz, materialised with a slowdown in democratisation since 2014 and the election of Khadjimba, with the Gal/i population further ostracised.

In contrast to Abkhazia, the literature on the political transition in South Ossetia has been more modest (Toal & O’Loughlin, 2013; German 2016; de Waal, 2019). Its political transition remains more elusive, “from communist authoritarianism toward an uncertain political future”, undermined by the “chaos of the post-communist transition” often with the fatalistic idea of “South Ossetia as an impossible state” (Toal & O’Loughlin, 2013). Whilst Abkhazia's statehood has been affirmed to date, this is far from being the case for South Ossetia, as its statehood “mirrors that of Russia’s North Caucasus republics” (International Crisis Group, 2010). Its population has steadily declined since 1989, it has only gained control over the areas it claims since 2008 thanks to Russia, and it “has very limited government capacity” (de Waal, 2019), thereby strengthening the doubts about its ability to act independently (Toal & O’Loughlin, 2013; German, 2016).

Abkhazia and South Ossetia have thus differed greatly in their political transition since declaring independence. Abkhazia has developed a set of sincere democratic institutions, although they have been used to enhance its ethnic state project; while South Ossetia has established itself as a “closed semi-authoritarian society” (de Waal, 2019), whose very concept of transition is challenged by concerns about the status of its statehood, discrepancies which this research seeks to investigate by further investigating the degrees of fairness and freedom in their last parliamentary elections.

II. Methodology and methods

A. Conceptualisation

1. “Free” and “Fair” elections

The conceptualisation of "free and fair elections" can be broken down into three stages: the definition of freedom and fairness, the assessment of the level of democracy through the holding of free and fair elections, and the limitations of elections as a criterion of democracy.

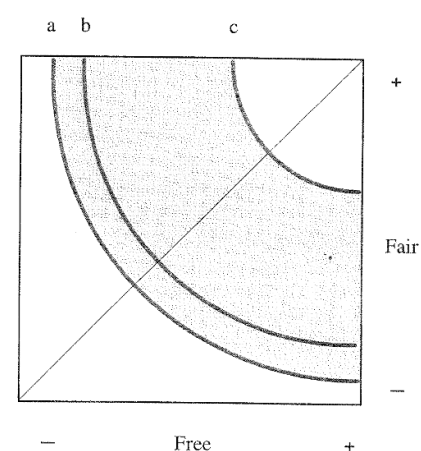
According to Jørgen Elklit and Palle Svensson (1997), the first use of the expression "free and fair" dates back to a United Nations report on the referendum for the independence of Togoland in 1956. Before being able to recognise the referendum, the UN first wanted to assess the degree of freedom and fairness of the elections. In his book *Polyarchy* (1971), Dahl gives a list of "requirements" for democracy in three categories: “formulate preferences”, “signify preferences” and “preferences weighted equal in conduct of government” among which stand out “free and fair elections”.⁶ Nevertheless, Dahl does not propose a detailed and clear definition of this expression, except that “elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon” (Dahl, 1989 quoted in Elklit and Svensson, 1997). In relatively simple terms, elections can be considered free when “the legal barriers to entry into the political arena are low, when there is substantial freedom for candidates and supporters of different political parties to campaign and solicit votes, and when voters experience little or no coercion in exercising their electoral choices” (Diamond, 2002). The level of freedom during the campaign can be measured by “some considerable freedom of speech, movement, assembly, and association in political life, if not fully in civil society” (Ibid). Free elections also require the absence of fraud and the intimidation of voters (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Elections are considered fair when “opposition parties campaign on a relatively even footing: they are not subject to repression or harassment, and they're not systematically denied access to the media or other critical resources” (Ibid). Jørgen Elklit and Palle Svensson (1997) stress the importance of assessing the degree of freedom and fairness of elections before the vote, during the vote and after the vote. To this end, they suggest a "checklist for elections assessment"⁷ for observers, which provides a relevant reading grid.

⁶ See appendix I.

⁷ See appendix II.

“Election outcomes are highly associated with democracy in the Western world” (Bogaards, 2007), notably since “supermajorities” and “one-party dominance” are not regular phenomena (Ibid). Nevertheless, the pattern of moderated victories in democratic regimes and total victories during elections in autocratic regimes was turned upside down by the Cold War, with the appearance of political regimes that “organize multi-party elections and have parliamentary opposition, but are not necessarily democratic” (Ibid). Elections in autocratic regimes have become more than just useful in that they “reinforce and prolong autocratic rule” (Brownlee, 2007), notably by enabling leaders to identify and sanction their opponents (Schedler, 2006). It is extremely complex to define whether an election is free and fair, particularly in the case of transitional regimes, where certain democratic criteria have sometimes been applied more loosely. Larry Diamond (2002) proposed a diagram with different curves translating the level of “flexibility” in the application of the free and fair criteria (see figure 1). Western formulae have also sometimes been criticised for denying a different reality on the ground, with a Euro-centric vision, particularly in de facto states where violence reigns (Smolnik, 2012). This challenge of ambiguity has led to observations that are sometimes flawed, with some international organisations validating elections in authoritarian regimes (Diamond, 2002). Several hybrid regimes have held elections without meeting all the criteria of democracy. Electoral authoritarian regimes, as theorised by Schedler (2015), “hold regular multiparty elections at the national level, yet violate liberal-democratic minimum standards in systematic and profound ways”, and elections in competitive authoritarian regimes “are competitive in that major opposition candidates are rarely excluded, opposition parties are able to campaign publicly, and there is no massive fraud” (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Figure 1



2. Level of democracy

Researchers have generally agreed on a definition of “procedural minimum” democracy (Dahl, 1971) comprising four components: “free, fair, and competitive elections”; “full adult suffrage”; “broad protection of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, press, and association”; and “the absence of non elected ‘tutelary’ authorities that limit officials’ power to govern” (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Levitsky and Way in *Competitive Authoritarian Regimes - Hybrid regimes after the Cold War* (2010) suggest a fifth attribute: “a reasonably level playing field between incumbents and opposition”. Several scholars, such as Schumpeter (1947) and Huntington (1991), adhered to a minimalist definition of democracy based solely on the criterion of competitive elections. Scholars

have progressively questioned “the tendency to classify regimes as democratic simply because they have multiparty elections with some degree of competition and uncertainty” (Diamond, 2002), giving rise to hybrid regimes (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way 2002; 2010, Bogaards, 2009; Ekman, 2009). Dahl even devised a new concept, Polyarchy, since “even the world’s most liberal democracies exhibit the pervasive imperfections of responsiveness” (Diamond, 2002). Overall, a consensus has been reached on the benefits of a “restricted and realistic, but not necessarily minimalist” definition (Møller & Skaaning, 2013). A simplified typology thus gives us a summary picture of the different conceptions in the academic world of the term democracy:

TABLE 1—A TYPOLOGY OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL REGIMES

| | Competitive Elections | Inclusive Elections with High Integrity | Civil Liberties | Rule of Law |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---|-----------------|-------------|
| Minimalist Democracy | + | | | |
| Electoral Democracy | + | + | | |
| Polyarchy | + | + | + | |
| Liberal Democracy | + | + | + | + |

Source: Møller, Jørgen, and Svend-Erik Skaaning. ‘Regime Types and Democratic Sequencing’. *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 1 (2013): 142–55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0010>.

□

This typology first encompasses a minimalist Schumpeterian definition of democracy, with competitive elections as its sole criterion. The electoral democracy implies “a maximization of the electoral criterion but nothing else” (Ibid). Dahl’s polyarchy provides a definition that includes criteria that go beyond elections (as shown above) while liberal democracy offers a combination of “inclusive elections, civil liberties, and the rule of law” (Ibid). As highlighted in the literature review, this semantic work has given rise to a proliferation of adjectives to define democracy – “ethnic democracy” (Smootha, 2001), “delegative democracy” (O’Donnell, 1994), or “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria, 1997) – as a result of the mushrooming of political regimes that do not meet the criteria of liberal democracy and yet still hold competitive elections (Møller & Skaaning, 2013). Møller and Skaaning (2013) underscored the methodological imperative to move away from searching for the best definition to instead combining all the definitions of democracy (Schumpeter, Dahl, and O’Donnell).

Whilst Dahl, in his “minimal procedure” definition, proposed seven conditions for democracy, Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl (1991) in their article “What democracy is... and is not” introduced two additional attributes that are relevant to the study of de facto states: “popularly elected officials must be able to exercise their constitutional powers without being subjected to

overriding opposition from unelected officials” and “the polity (...) must be able to act independently of constraints imposed by some other overarching political system”, reflecting in particular the importance of the patron state. Finally, their contribution to the semantic debate also proved relevant in proposing that there should no longer be talk of the essential components of democracy, but rather of indicators to show how democracies differ, because, as demonstrated above, many regimes moving away from authoritarianism “can mix different components to produce different democracies” (Ibid). Among these indicators, they propose: consensus, participation, responsiveness, majority rule or check and balances.

B. Methodology

1. Research design

This research, in keeping with the semantic debate, does not focus on a minimalist definition of democracy, justified by the specific nature of the cases studied, where other indicators need to be considered and contextualised: governance without external interference, respect for civil liberties, absence of violence, etc. However, for reasons of time and resources, only the criterion of free and fair elections will be tested and as such it is not the objective of this study to propose a labelling of the regimes in these two de facto states given the risk of creating semantic inconsistencies. Nevertheless, this research offers a first foray into the field of comparative political studies applied to de facto states, particularly in the evaluation of their level of democracy.

This qualitative research is a small-n design. It is a comparative case study based on John Stuart Mill’s Most Similar System Design (MSSD) with “different values on the dependent variable and similar values on all but one of the possible causal variables” (J.Levy, 2008). The aim of this research is to help fill an empirical and theoretical gap by comparing the most recent parliamentary elections held in Abkhazia (2022) and in South Ossetia (2019), in an effort to highlight certain explanations to justify their different democratisation processes. No comparison between these two de facto states has ever been carried out.

First and foremost, the focus on elections was adopted for theoretical reasons. Although a minimalist definition of democracy is nowadays widely rejected, the holding of free and fair elections is nonetheless the essential element of a democratic system and remains significant in assessing the level of democracy. From a methodological angle, elections are a criterion of democracy that can be analysed without travelling to the territories. Indeed, elections are covered

extensively by the local and international media and have been the subject of numerous scholarly works. The decision to analyse the most recent elections was justified by the access to data and, insofar as the political situation of the de facto entities is in permanent motion, the elections were well known to the interviewees, allowing for a well-documented and up-to-date study.

2. Comparative study and research question

The de facto states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are both the result of a series of violent struggles in the early 1990s between the pro-independence forces of the breakaway regions and the Georgian state. In the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008, Russia officially recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. This independence has been marked by an increased dependence of both de facto states on Russian resources to ensure their economic survival and security following their isolation from both their parent state and the international community. They are dominated by their northern patron militarily, economically, and even politically; all of which has been legalised by a series of bilateral agreements since 2008 (Ambrosio & A. Lange, 2016). Although the two de facto states have held regular presidential and parliamentary elections since their declarations of independence, they have developed relatively different political regimes. Whereas the political competition has been described as high in Abkhazia and the opposition strong enough to push out political rulers, South Ossetia has “competitive elections but they take place between a small pool of candidates”, has “much of its legislation and decision-making originate in Moscow” (de Waal, 2020) and has been considered as having “undoubtedly the weakest democratic credentials” (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012) of the South Caucasian de facto states. The media system is held within an iron fist by the Ossetian government and prevents the democratic relay of political events without mentioning the electoral commission, which reserves the right to make a partial selection of candidates. In Abkhazia, “high levels of democratic freedom” (Skakov, 2005) are regularly reported. Several criteria have been put forward to justify its democratisation, such as the “emergence of political opposition and critical civil society” (Kopeček, 2016), while in South Ossetia the damage caused by the war, its small size, geographical isolation and extreme dependence on Russia have been cited as obstacles to democratisation. Therefore, how to explain the fact that Abkhazia has apparently developed genuine democratic features, whereas they appear to be merely a façade in South Ossetia?

3. The hypothesis-generating case study

This comparative study will be conducted with the aim of generating new hypotheses. The hypothesis-generating case study “seeks to generate new hypotheses inductively and/or to refine existing hypotheses” (della Porta & Keating, 2012). This method invites the researcher to “identify patterns” and then propose “hypotheses which may then be tested in some subsequent study” (Hartwick & Barki, 1994). In sum, seven hypothesis will be generated throughout this study based on the following factors: the geography of the territory (F1); the state of the economy (F2); the Soviet legacy (F3); nationalism (F4); patron state interference (F5); international aid for the development of civil society (F6); and independence aspirations (F7). The latter are factors that are posited to affect the likelihood of free and fair elections in de facto states. None of these elements can be considered in isolation; like a chain, they assemble and complement each other to explain the political divergences.

C. Methods

For this research, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with international researchers and experts on domestic issues in the de facto states. Semi-structured interviews have the “advantage of their flexibility for collecting qualitative data” (Kallio & al, 2016). This format fully satisfied the desire for a hypothesis development approach “to identify new themes while having the participant share his or her own personal experiences in the moment” (Magaldi, 2020). Indeed, data are scarce on the conduct of elections in de facto states and this format allows the interviewee more time to elaborate on sensitive subjects and makes it easier for the researcher to identify certain patterns. Each interview, lasting around 1 hour and 45 minutes, was designed to identify possible explanatory factors for the political divergences adopted in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For this purpose, the interviewees were invited first to answer rather general questions about the state of political life in the de facto states, the conduct of the elections, then the notable differences between the two elections, the impact of criteria specific to the de facto states (e.g involvement of the parent state, lack of recognition...) and finally questions relating to the labelling of their regime and the level of democracy. The varied sample of interviewees made it possible to gather in-depth information on the organisation of elections with local players working actively with the de facto territories. The international researchers were able to put this data into a more scientific framework, making it possible to associate an empirical fact with a scientific concept.

The interviews were supported by an extensive analysis of the Abkhazian (Apsnypress, Abkhaz Inform, Abkhaz World) and South Ossetian press (PEC). The articles ranged from basic facts (candidates/parties, voting system, electoral timetable) to information on democratic flaws (candidates arbitrarily rejected, vote-buying, threats). The Abkhazian media offered a more open study of electoral distortions with significant room for the opposition, whilst, on the other hand, the South Ossetian media were subjected to greater control. Local articles were supplemented by articles from the international press (JAMnews, Georgia Today, OC media, Civil Georgia, *Ekho kavkaza*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, France 24), legal documents (e.g constitution, laws on elections) to check the legality of procedures, electoral reports published by the monitoring bodies (Central Electoral Commission) in order to obtain the results, and academic articles.

Introduction

This chapter aims at providing a detailed overview of the parliamentary elections in South Ossetia (2019) and Abkhazia (2022). Beyond supplying the reader with the necessary background of the elections, this chapter paves the way for more extensive research into the domestic life of de facto states by inviting disciplines such as electoral sociology to further this study, in that voting is also a social act, and as such, a change in electoral behaviour may be indicative of wider societal changes in de facto states. It should be stressed that these initial attempts remain preliminary due to limited electoral access and restricted freedom of expression, while the fragility of political parties results in the meagre existence of exploitable political marketing material (website, logo, advertising). These methodological obstacles did, however, enable certain aspects to be highlighted which will be compared throughout this research, both in the evaluation of elections and in the labelling of political regimes: the importance of the legal framework for entering the political arena, the level of institutionalisation of political parties or access to and content of political debates. Finally, the reader is invited to pay special attention to the various attempts made by the authorities to guarantee the so-called democratic conduct of the elections, which will then be discussed in subsequent chapters, highlighting the difference between democratic rhetoric and its more or less façade enforcement.

I. South Ossetian parliamentary elections (2019)

The most recent South Ossetian parliamentary elections took place on 9 June 2019. The elections were marked by a change in the voting system – a first in the fifteen years of the de facto parliament's existence – and a victory for the ruling party, which, however, lost its constitutional majority. The voting day was monitored by some 50 “international representatives” from other de facto states and from Nicaragua, Germany, Finland, Belgium, Japan and Italy. It is important to note that the data presented are largely based on reports from the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) and the state media agency "PEC". As a result of the sources used, the data exploited will have to be interpreted with caution.

A. Voting system

At the fourth meeting of the eighth session of the Parliament of the Republic of South Ossetia on 30 March 2018, the Law of the Republic of South Ossetia "On Elections of Deputies of the Parliament of the Republic of South Ossetia" was adopted by a constitutional majority of votes, formalising the return to a mixed proportional-majoritarian system ([Южная Осетия — республиканская общественно-политическая газета, 2018](#)), where 17 deputies are elected via a proportional system among the parties that manage to exceed 7%, and the remaining 17 deputies are elected by majority vote. Deputies are elected for five-year-long mandates ([Правительство Республики Южная Осетия](#)) and represent one of the 17 constituencies.⁸ Several politicians have welcomed this return to proportional representation – which was previously in force until 2004 – allowing a return to “grassroots” politics, familiar to de facto states. In 2019, Gino Tskhovrebov, a self-nominated candidate for constituency No. 6 recalled the importance of this change for voters who, for the past fifteen years, had not had the opportunity to vote for “a candidate who directly represents their interests, a person who could solve their problems” ([PEC, 2019](#)). South Ossetian political scientist Dina Alborova reaffirmed the need for political party participation, but noted that the “majoritarian candidates are good, because there are people who, outside the parties, want to realize themselves in politics” ([PEC, 2019](#)).

According to the law, direct nomination of candidates may be done by self-nomination or nomination by political parties themselves. A political party that has put forward a republican list of candidates must collect at least 1,500 voter signatures in support of the list, with at least 150 signatures from each administrative-territorial unit (Article 39, Chapter 6). A self-nominated candidate cannot be nominated by a political party and must collect at least 300 voter signatures registered in the territory of the respective constituency to be qualified as an official candidate (Article 38, Chapter 6).

The electoral law requires candidates from the party in single-mandate districts to submit a set of documents to the CEC, including “signature sheets with voters’ signatures (10 percent of the total number of voters in the districts in which they intend to run), a protocol on the results of collecting signatures and the first financial report” ([PEC, 2019](#)). After the submission of these documents, the CEC has 14 days to either accept or refuse the candidate’s registration. The CEC has until 35 days before the vote to register candidates for single-member constituencies and to accept documents for

⁸ 9 in Tskhinvali, 2 in Tskhinvali region, 2 in Dzau district, 2 in Znauri district, and 2 in Leninorsky district, see map [Sputnik, 2019](#).

self-nominated candidates, thus setting the document submission deadline for May 4 ([PEC, 2019](#)). A self-nominated candidate is also required to submit a package of documents, among them “period of residence on the territory of the Republic of South Ossetia, citizenship, (...) number and date of issue of the passport of a citizen of the Republic of South Ossetia...”, also “information on the amount and sources of income of the candidate, his wife (spouse) and minor children” (Article 34, chapter 6).

B. Political parties and candidates⁹

According to Article 4 of the Law “On the Elections of Deputies”, any citizen aged 21 who has lived in the territory of South Ossetia for the last five years is eligible to be a Member of Parliament (Chapter 1, Article 4).¹⁰ On 19 May 2019, the CEC completed the registration of all candidates taking part in the parliamentary election. The CEC stated that, “189 candidates were registered by the Central Election Commission, 90 of them are nominees from parties in a single constituency and 99 in 17 single-mandate constituencies, of which 60 are nominees from parties, and 39 are self-nominated” ([PEC, 2019](#)). A total of 78 applicants were rejected, including former head of the presidential administration Alan Dzhioev and ex-Minister of Communications Georgy Kabisov, who was previously detained on charges of abuse of power.

Political parties “United Ossetia” (Единая Осетия), Nykhas (Ныхас), Unity of the People (Единство народа), “People's Party” (Народная партия), “Unity” (Единство), “Fydybasta” (Фыдыбаста), and the “Communist Party” (Коммунистическая партия Республики Южная Осетия) were validated by the CEC, while the “Rodina” party (Родина) had its party list rejected because the signature sheets collected did not divide voters by district and town ([Эхо Кавказа, 2019](#)). However, four of its candidates were allowed to compete in single-mandate constituencies ([PEC, 2019](#)). Among the most important self-nominated political figures allowed to compete were the former president of South Ossetia Leonid Tibilov, the former head of the Leningorsky district Zaza Driyayev, and the head of the parliamentary committee on budget and taxes Zhanna Kochieva. Among the party nominees was the head of the parliamentary committee on foreign policy and inter-parliamentary relations Igor Kochiev, nominated by the Communist Party. In total, eight parties submitted a notification to the CEC and their rights were regulated by the law “On Political Parties” ([Парламент Республики Южная Осетия, 2019](#)).

⁹ See Appendix III for a more detailed description of the competing political parties.

¹⁰ Exceptions for the five-year residency requirement can, though, be negotiated in the case of an “annual paid leave, business trip, illness and study” (Chapter 1, Article 4).

As outlined above, the CEC rejected 78 candidates in total. The most common reason was the “violation” of the electoral procedure, without any further details mentioned by the commission which remained vague in its justifications. Sometimes cases of missing signatures, incomplete tax declarations or affiliation with political parties while registered as an independent were mentioned as justifications. Several candidates appealed to the Supreme Court, but the Court did not respond to the complaints. One of the candidates denied lawful access in the political competition was Hilarion Gagiev. Having been initially registered, his candidacy was subsequently rejected following the “revelation” of his Georgian citizenship, which he denied ([Радио Свободная Европа, 2022](#)).

C. Campaign

The United Ossetia party was the first to be registered by the CEC, and started its campaign on 25 April 2019 ([PEC, 2019](#)). However, according to Article 54, Chapter 8 of the law “On Elections of Deputies”, “election campaigning on the channel of TV and radio broadcasting organizations and in printed periodicals” begins 20 days before voting day, May 20. According to the law, a lottery was organised by the CEC with the participation of representatives of TV and radio broadcasting organisations¹¹ that determined “the dates and time of airing the election campaign materials of political parties” (Article 56, Chapter 8). Candidates also had the possibility to use paid television and radio airtime and newspaper pages to cover their election programme. This legal framework sought to prohibit any election campaign that would degrade “national dignity, promoting the exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on the basis of their attitude to religion, social, racial, national, religious or linguistic affiliation” (Article 60, Chapter 8). Corrupt practices were also punished, such as “handing them (the voters) money, gifts and other material values” (Ibid).

During this campaign, the Nykhas, Unity of the People, and Fydybasta parties were deemed “oppositional”, while the People's Party, the Communist Party, and the Unity Party were defined by analysts as “centrist” ([PEC, 2019](#)). The election campaign was animated by numerous debates, with some political objectives shared by several parties. Inal Tasoev, nominated by Unity of the People, mentioned the lack of roads, developed cities and agricultural machinery ([PEC, 2019](#)), and was supported by Elbrus Tskhovrebov of the Nykhas party, who deplored the “bad roads, lack of water and electricity” (Ibid). The then ruling party, United Ossetia, emphasised the considerable improvements it had carried out – including replacing roofs destroyed during the war – but

¹¹ The media “Khurzarin” (Хурзарин), “South Ossetia” (Южная Осетия), the State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company “Ir” (Ир) and the State Committee for Information and Press (Госкомитета информации и печати) distributed the airtime of political parties that registered a national list.

acknowledged that the agricultural sector was still ill-equipped. The Communist Party raised the issue of retirement, with Gagloev Malkhaz stating the need "to increase pensions and benefits for vulnerable segments of the population to a real subsistence level" (PEC, 2019). The issue of patriotism was also widely discussed. Yuri Beteev, self-nominated candidate of constituency No. 6, called on citizens to vote for "those who have already proven themselves, are patriots and who will advance the interests of Ossetia" (PEC, 2019). The Fydybasta recalled that land is "property of the state" and cannot be sold (PEC, 2019). The issue of integration with Russia and reunification with North-Ossetia was discussed and unanimously agreed upon (PEC, 2019). The campaigning style was a familiar South Ossetian grassroots practice, with candidates interacting with the electorate at organised rallies or by going directly door-to-door.

Overall, South Ossetian analysts commented on the mediocre quality of the debates, as single-mandate candidates struggled to defend their desire to enter parliament due to their political inexperience. The absence of "specific mechanisms for solving some problems" (PEC, 2019), with powerful rhetoric about the "The State of Alania", and "the will of the people" (Ibid), left a bitter taste of *déjà vu*.

D. Voting day

According to Article 4, Chapter 1 of the law "On Elections of Deputies", all citizens aged 18 and whose place of residence is located on the territory of the corresponding single-mandate constituency, has the right to vote. On election day, voters were given two ballots, one for the candidates from the party list nominated and one for single-mandate candidates (PEC, 2019). According to the CEC, about 31,000 people were on the registered voters list (PEC, 2019; Open Caucasus Media, 2019). A total of 77 polling stations were opened: 73 on South Ossetian territory, 2 in the embassies in Moscow and Sukhum/i and 2 in the consulates in North Ossetia (PEC, 2019).

Several measures were taken during the election period to avoid voting at different offices such as processes by which "each ballot is signed by all observers of the polling station, and a stamp is affixed in the voter's passport" (PEC, 2019), or the conduct of "engineering and technical inspections of polling stations" by law enforcement officers (Ibid; PEC, 2019). All this "excludes the possibility of all sorts of fraud" and gives the electoral process "exceptional openness and transparency" according to Alan Chochiev, deputy head of the internal policy department of the republic's presidential administration (PEC, 2019). For voters deemed "unable" to go to the polling station on election day, a system of home voting home was introduced. After submitting a formal

application to the precinct election commission through members of their family or acquaintances on voting day, “members of the commission, together with representatives who have the right to sign, go to the addresses, according to the applications received, with the number of ballots equivalent to number of applicants” ([PEC, 2019](#); [PEC, 2019](#)).

Finally, for elections to be considered valid, more than 50% of registered voters must participate, political parties must exceed the 7% barrier and single-members and self-nominated candidates must obtain an absolute majority of votes ([PEC, 2019](#)).

E. Results¹²

The turnout, according to the CEC, was 66.24% with 23,351 voters participating. A total of 98 candidates, 60 party-nominated and 38 independents, competed for 17 single-mandate seats. According to the election results, five parties entered the parliament of President Anatoly Bibilov's government: United Ossetia (14), People's Party (5), Nykhas (5), Unity of the People (3), and Communist Party (2). United Ossetia lost its constitutional majority and performed much worse than in 2014 when the party obtained 43%, winning 20 seats ([Civil.ge, 2014](#)). The Communist Party entered parliament again, after failing to secure a seat in 2014. The Fydybasta and the Unity parties did not succeed in making their mark, garnering only around 3% of the vote.

F. International observers

The 2019 South Ossetian parliamentary elections were monitored by about 70 accredited “foreign observers”. Of the 70 “observers”, about 50 travelled to South Ossetia from the Russian Federation, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, the Lugansk People's Republic, the Donetsk People's Republic and Transnistria, and, “for the first time observers from Nicaragua, Germany, Finland, Belgium, as well as two observers from Japan and three from Italy” ([PEC, 2019](#)). Several “observers” confirmed that the elections had been conducted democratically. Sergey Tsekov of the Russian Federation delegation stated that the “democracy in South Ossetia is at the highest level” ([PEC, 2019](#)) and Ekaterina Soroka of the People's Republic of Luhansk congratulated “the triumph of democracy” ([PEC, 2019](#)). Several “observers” pointed out the different procedures, such as Artur Tovmasyan from the Nagorno-Karabakh delegation, who mentioned “transparent ballot boxes” as “an attribute of democratic elections” ([PEC, 2019](#)). Finally, some asserted that the elections were in compliance

¹² See Appendix IV for a detailed descriptions of the results.

with international standards, for instance Gunnar Norbert Lindemann of the German delegation stated that the elections were “held according to European standards” ([PEC, 2019](#)).

II. Abkhazian parliamentary elections (2022)

The Abkhazian parliamentary elections took place in March 2022, with a first round on the 12th and the second on the 26th. The elections took place in a tumultuous environment in all respects. In March 2022, the polity faced an emergency situation with a raging epidemic and economic crisis, including a lack of basic necessities, and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine fueled fears that Moscow would reduce its financial support ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)). Politically, the climate was visibly tense. A rally organised by the opposition on 21 December 2021 resulted in many people being arrested and charged, following attempts to take over official buildings with the slogans "we will not call to sell Abkhazia" or “give light and water” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2021](#)). The People's Patriotic Union of Abkhazia, an opposition bloc comprising a majority of political parties and movements invited the ruling authorities on 19 January 2022 to sign a memorandum to ease socio-political tensions. The memorandum envisaged “the transition to a mixed electoral system within two months”, as well as to develop and adopt a new Constitutional Law “On Elections of Parliament Deputies”, “to amend the Constitutional Law ‘On the Cabinet’ and redistribute powers between the branches of government”, and delaying the elections by one year ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)). The elections, largely boycotted by the opposition, were won mostly by supporters of the government of president Aslan Bzhania.

A. Voting system

Abkhazian deputies are elected for a five-year term based on a majority system in a single constituency ([Civil.ge, 2021](#)). A candidate who obtains more than 50% of the votes in his/her constituency is elected to parliament. According to the law “On the election of deputies to the National Assembly-Parliament of the Republic of Abkhazia”, political parties may nominate only one candidate per constituency who may or may not be a member of the party, but must not belong to another political group. The nomination of a candidate by a group of electors is possible if the group consists of at least five members and succeeds in collecting at least 200 but not more than 250 signatures in support of the candidate from the constituency (Article 4, Chapter 1). As mentioned above, one of the demands made by the opposition during the rally in Sukhum/i on 21 December was to enact the transition to a mixed electoral system in order to ensure party representation in the parliament. The proposal was rejected by Bzhania, who called on the

opposition to organise a referendum, which the latter did not wish to do ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)). Between the two rounds, candidates pursued this demand further, and sometimes called for a total restructuring of the Abkhaz parliamentary system. For example, the creation of a bi-cameral parliament modelled on the German system was proposed by the political figure Tengiz Dzhopua ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)).

B. Political parties and candidates¹³

Nomination of candidates for the election began 50 days prior to voting day (21 January) and lasted for 20 days. During this period, the CEC reviewed the necessary documents and official registration began 30 days before the start of the election and ended 20 days later. Included in the documents required for candidates nominated by a political party are “information about the amount and source of income of the candidate for the past two years and the property owned by the candidate” (Article 5, Chapter 1). For candidates nominated by a group of voters, the same information is required alongside the document certifying the final number of 200 signatures (Ibid).

In total, 123 candidates, of which 107 were men and 16 were women, competed for the 35 seats in the People's Assembly, 19 of which were incumbents. The Abkhazian Central Election Commission closed registration for candidates on 2 March. Of the 11 political parties registered by the Ministry of Justice, five had nominated candidates for the parliamentary race: the pro-government parties Amsakhara (Амцахара) (9) and the People's Front for Justice and Development (Народный фронт за справедливость и развитие) (1), the opposition parties Apsny (Апсны) (2) and the People's Party of Abkhazia (Народная партия Абхазии) (1), and the centrist Party of Economic Development of Abkhazia (Партия экономического развития Абхазии) (2) ([Sputnik, 2022](#)).

The main opposition party, the Forum of National Unity of Abkhazia, did not nominate any candidates. This was interpreted by many as a boycott of the elections, even though several other opposition parties took part ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)). The Party chairman, Aslan Bartsyts, mentioned that the party did not boycott the election but “refrain[ed] from nominating” on behalf of the party in protest of the refusal of the president to postpone the elections for a year, the time required to switch to a mixed electoral system (Ibid).

¹³ See Appendix V for a more detailed description of the competing political parties.

C. Campaign

The campaign took place in a troubled political climate, with a growing dissatisfaction of the current parliament. Voters mentioned risky and incomplete decisions as well as discussions on sensitive issues, such as abortion, which frightened some parts of the electorate. The word "criminal" was often used alongside the regret that too little attention was paid to improving the living conditions of the population, where water and electricity cuts are a recurring issues. At the same time, some decisions received a controversial welcome such as the amendment on the law “On citizenship” clarifying the situation of non-Abkhazian citizens who did not live in the territory between 1994 and 1999, which upset the veteran organisation “Aruaa”, denouncing the hidden purpose of the “granting of Abkhazian citizenship to Georgian citizens living in Abkhazia” (ЭХО Кавказа, 2022; ЭХО Кавказа, 2022).

From 17 February, the TV debates started in an order determined by the lottery (Article 21, Chapter 3). The parliamentary candidates were given “equal airtime on state television and radio, as well as the opportunity to appear in other media outlets to present their views and electoral programme, free of charge” (Ibid). According to the electorate, debates were considered mediocre with candidates who discussed the same problems that have been discussed for 30 years, if they even bothered to attend the debates (ЭХО Кавказа, 2022).

Among the topics discussed was the economic crisis and resulting inflation and unemployment rates, as “25 out of 123 candidates who ran on Saturday had indicated they were unemployed by the time of registering their candidacy” (Open Caucasus media, 2022). The war in Ukraine was also raised, but with no divisions as both the opposition and the ruling party showed full support for the Russian “special military operation”. Other issues discussed included power cuts, the right to vote for Georgian citizens (ЭХО Кавказа, 2022), amending the law on the election of deputies by requiring mastery of the Abkhaz language as necessary,¹⁴ and gender equality with 16 female candidates compared with 107 men, which, although better than the last elections was still “very far” from true equality according to the political figure Natella Akaba (ЭХО Кавказа, 2022). During the debates, the questions addressed to the candidates focused on their “attitude to the sale of real estate to foreigners, to oil production in the republic, to passportization in the eastern regions of Abkhazia, to ways to restore the energy system” (Ibid). Experts noted well-known, recurring

¹⁴ During the elections, Abkhaz language proficiency was only required for presidential candidates. Since then, the law has been amended and deputies must also comply with it. It should be noted, however, that this measure is only partially applied and does not meet with consensus, as many ethnic Abkhaz do not master the language, Russian remaining the lingua franca.

questions for which candidates are often so well prepared that they “know which answers to them are ‘correct’, that is, approved by the majority of the electorate, and thus answer ‘correctly’” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)).

D. Voting day

Every citizen of the Republic of Abkhazia who has reached the age of 18 by election day has the right to vote for Parliament according to the law “On the election of deputies (Article 2, Chapter 1). Each voter has his/her left thumb marked by polling station officials to avoid double voting (Article 31, Chapter 4). The law also allows for “outside voting” with a mobile ballot box. Article 32 states that if the voter “is unable to fill in the ballot by himself or herself, [they have] the right to invite another person to the booth at his or her discretion” (Article 32, Chapter 4).

In the context of the pandemic, several additional rules were put in place, such as the wearing of masks, the presence of sanitiser in the voting area and limited groups of voters at one time. However, these were qualified as recommendations only because, according to a member of the Central Election Commission Alyas Brandzia, “the rules will be violated a priori” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)).

Several typologies of the electorate have been proposed by analysts and public figures. Research in electoral sociology allows the highlighting of certain political trends that are essential to the conduct of this research, such as the origin of certain practices (e.g. violent building takeovers), expectations (e.g a state that must take care of its electorate as it did during the Soviet times) or the level of politicisation (e.g the meaning of voting). Several typologies of the electorate have been developed including that of Vitaly Sharia. In this 2022 typology,¹⁵ he divided the Abkhazian electorate into four categories ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)).

- Those who are able to fairly assess the actions of their authorities thanks to their critical thinking mind.
- Those whose gullibility with regard to the promises of the opposition comes along with a growing desire to protest over time.

¹⁵ Vitaly Sharia had already published about the type of voters in 2014 and 2019. See previous typologies: [Эхо Кавказа, 2014](#) ; [Эхо Кавказа, 2019](#).

- Those who are quickly disillusioned when, no matter who it may be, the person at the head of the State has not put an end to the reign of the corrupt whom he/her dislikes, and had not "shed golden rain on her/him".
- Those with the most radical intentions, mainly young people, whose desire for a change of power goes hand in hand with the seizure of administrative buildings.

The analyst also emphasised a common trend in the post-Soviet space when people are “taught that they should be provided with everything by the state” (Ibid), therefore causing quick disillusionment. In the Republic of Abkhazia, “this holy faith, that everything depends on the authorities, was observed in practice for the first time in the nought years” (Ibid). More generally, the Abkhaz electorate has become increasingly cynical. It understands that politicians need the voters only during the election process; after the election, the common voter is usually forgotten. More often in rural areas, the candidate agrees with the community that he/she will solve their communal problems, and the community responds by giving its votes. In particular, these elections confirmed that although the legitimacy of the state is not discussed, in other words that “the population within a state accepts the state's myths and rules of the game” that of the regime, namely “trusting the people in power” (Bakke & al, 2014) is relatively low.

E. Results¹⁶

The first round of elections took place on 12 March 2022 and of the 35 candidates in the single-mandate majoritarian districts 17 were elected in their constituency, with the vote to be repeated within two months in the Gudauta electoral district, after the CEC had assessed an insufficient turnout.¹⁷ According to the CEC, the first round recorded a turnout of 51.2% with 132,000 voters ([Open Caucasus media, 2022](#)). Among the first elected were five former MPs and some well-known political figures such as the former mayors of Sukhum/i Kan Kvarchiya (2019-2020) and Adgur Kharazia (2002-2003) (Ibid).

The second round of elections took place on 26 March 2022 with a turnout of 54.52%. There were 67,659 people on the voter lists and 36,885 cast their ballots ([Апсныпресс, 2022](#)). 15 candidates were elected and two elections were reheld in constituencies 8 and 18. For the second round there

¹⁶ See Appendix VI for a detailed descriptions of the results.

¹⁷ An election is declared invalid if less than 25 per cent of the voters on the electoral roll participate in it (see “On the election of deputies to the National Assembly-Parliament of the Republic of Abkhazia”).

was no minimum level of participation, the election was considered valid regardless of the number of voters. In addition, the candidate with the most votes won. The election results consolidated Bzhania's presidency with three MPs who could be considered opposition and six with no significant political preferences. The rest of the parliament supported the ruling party. The Amsakhara party won four seats, the Aitaira party won one seat and the remaining 30 seats were independent.

F. International observers

According to the Central Election Commission, a total of 25 international observers travelled to observe the elections, in addition to the local observers sent by the various candidates. Among the international representatives were individuals from the Russian Federation, Transnistria, South Ossetia, the Lugansk People's Republic, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union of Belarus and Russia ([Open Caucasus media, 2022](#)). Vladimir Zorin, Chairman of the Russian Public Chamber Commission on Harmonisation of Inter-ethnic and Inter-religious Relations, stated that the elections “compl[ied] with international standards, compl[ied] with the law on elections of the republic” and that they met “all the democratic requirements that we have in the most advanced part of society and state-public institutions” ([Sputnik, 2022](#)).

Chapter 3 - The impact of the “free” and “fair” election criterion in assessing the level of democracy

Introduction

“The modal dictator in the contemporary world holds multiparty elections” (Schedler, 2015). The literature on hybrid regimes has thoroughly demonstrated that the holding of elections as a criterion of democracy is deficient given that many illiberal regimes hold “elections for the sake of elections” (Bedford, 2017) such as Belarus or Russia, which have successfully implemented a “menu of manipulation” (Schedler, 2002) to guarantee the ruling party or incumbent their re-election. More astounding still, manipulated elections “may reinforce and prolong autocratic rule” (Brownlee, 2007) in that they help to regulate “societal discontent and confine the opposition” (Ibid). The adjectives “free” and “fair” clarified the expectations for elections, the mere holding of which does not make it possible to speak of democracy. This chapter seeks to assess the level of freedom and fairness of the latest parliamentary elections in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and to compare the results with the regime types that have been attributed to these de facto states in the literature and in the interviews conducted. This research agrees with the literature which has rejected an *à la carte* application of the criteria of democracy. In this respect, the threshold for determining whether elections are free is based on the non-discriminatory legislation for entry into political competition with universal and equal suffrage, the absence of unjustified decisions by the monitoring bodies to reject candidates, the absence of fraud and vote-buying, and a media apparatus that is free to operate. The minimum threshold for fair elections is the presence of an opposition not subject to threats, the absence of ethnic discrimination, respect for the secrecy of the ballot, the absence of manipulation of funds and facilities by the ruling party, control of exceptional voting measures (voting at home), and an electorate free of all influences.¹⁸

¹⁸ For an exhaustive list, see: Elklit, Jørgen & Palle Svensson. “What Makes Elections Free and Fair?” *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 3 (1997): 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1997.0041>.

I. South Ossetia

A. Level of freedom

1. Before polling day

The legal barriers for entry into the political arena (Diamond, 2002) in South Ossetia are significant and coupled with the partial application of the law which have given rise to a number of inconsistencies and violations. It should be remembered that on 30 March 2018 the electoral system was reverted to the mixed system that had been in force until 2004 and several analysts warned of the dangers of its return. Firstly, according to Anatoly Bibilov, this measure was adopted “in the spirit of the steps that the Russian Federation and South Ossetia are taking to improve the legal framework of the Republic of South Ossetia” ([Парламент Республики Южная Осетия](#)). Not only does this decision directly call into question the independence of the South Ossetian legislative system, it also strengthened the façade of party organisation, given that many parties were already modelled, more or less, on the Russian Federation.¹⁹ According to Russian political scientist Alexander Skakov, the mixed electoral system, highly popular in the territories of the former USSR, considerably narrows political competition as “it is easier to find fault with an independent candidate (...) because there is no party structure behind him” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2019](#)). Later that year, on 27 December 2018, the Parliament of South Ossetia adopted the constitutional law "On Basic Guarantees of Electoral Rights and the Right to Participate in a Referendum of Citizens of the Republic of South Ossetia". Clause 4 of Article 30 of the law specifies how to fulfil signature sheets in favour of a candidate, and in particular that voters must indicate his/her passport number and the date of issue. However, only two months later, on 28 February 2019, another law was adopted, “On the election of a deputy of the RSO parliament”, which mentioned that the date of issue was not required anymore. Several opposition MPs condemned these inconsistencies, which favoured the United Ossetia party. Indeed, Nykhas party MP Zita Besaeva said that the “law turns out to be raw, unfinished, and its application is difficult” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2019](#)) and South Ossetian political scientist Dina Alborova spoke about “conflicting laws” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2019](#)), even going so far as to cost some candidates their participation when they found out about the changes on the final day for submitting documents. Furthermore, on 15 May 2019, less than a month before the elections, the authorities once again changed the procedure for obtaining South Ossetian citizenship, now

¹⁹ Some examples: in 2022 the United Ossetia party signed an agreement with the United Russia party, and the South Ossetian Communist Party is a member of the Union of Communist Parties – Communist Party of the Soviet Union (UCP–CPSU) headed by the Russian politician Gennady Zyuganov.

requiring a "written renunciation of Georgian citizenship" ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)) sent to the South Ossetian Foreign Ministry, and then "forward[ed] (...) to the Swiss Embassy in Moscow" (Ibid). This new procedure caused considerable delays in applications for citizenship, excluding a significant segment of the population from political competition. Lastly, just months before the elections, MPs voted for amendments to the law "On political parties" dated December 4, 2002 ([PEC, 2019](#)), banning electoral blocs from the electoral process.

What at first appeared to be a lowering of legal constraints to enter the electoral race in reality revealed an even greater alignment with Moscow and an arbitrary manipulation of the law to shrink the political playing field. As a result, a number of candidates did not have the freedom to access the electoral campaign stage (Diamond, 2002). Authorisation to run for election is often provided at a very late stage²⁰ presuming candidates are not rejected by the CEC for "the most absurd pretexts", such as the massive loss of "documents of majoritarian candidates" ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)). Moreover, voters were regularly intimidated (Diamond, 2002). David Sanakoev, the leader of the Nykhas party, denounced several attempts at intimidation by the authorities demanding "to switch sides in favour of the ruling party" ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)). Attempts at fraud (Diamond, 2002) have also been reported with the promise of issuing South Ossetian passports to the Georgian majority of the Akhalkgori district "to inflate the number of voters ahead of the upcoming polls" ([Civil.ge, 2019](#)). Meanwhile, a number of voters expressed fear of seeing "their passports (...) taken away" ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)) if they were to vote for an opposition candidate.

Sanakoev also revealed that when candidates handed in their application documents to the CEC, it was carried out under "the constant supervision of one of the representatives of United Ossetia" ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#); [ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)), creating "a nervous environment" (Ibid), invalidating the criterion "freedom from fear in connection with the election" included in Elklit & Svensson's grid (1997) .

Finally, the freedom of speech, movement, assembly, and association (Diamond, 2002) requirement was also hindered, with political meetings banned by the local authorities as they "did not have instructions from their superiors" ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)) as well as numerous debates in which only the United Ossetia candidate took part (e.g. [ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)), as opposition candidates objected to limited debate time and controlled interactions ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)).

²⁰ The United Ossetia ruling party was the first to be authorised to campaign, on 25 April 2019, when most parties had their lists approved between 15 and 17 May 2019.

2. On polling day

On polling day, few comments were made about voters experiencing coercion in exercising their electoral choices (Diamond, 2002). However, a scandal broke out when a representative of United Ossetia, Uruzmag Magkoev, was seen in a tent talking to voters next to a polling station in Vladikavkaz. Reported by the political parties Nykhas, People's Party and Fydybasta, the CEC took no further action, determining the voting process to have been “calm” ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)).

3. After polling day

The South Ossetian legal framework provides “legal possibilities of complaint” (Elklit & Svensson, 1997) with the possibility to appeal to the courts. The law “On Elections of Deputies of the Parliament of the Republic of South Ossetia” mentions the possibility to “appeal or protest against the voting results” (Article 22, Chapter 4), while the law “On Basic Guarantees of Electoral Rights and the Right to Participate in a Referendum of Citizens of the Republic of South Ossetia” stipulates that “the Supreme Court of the Republic of South Ossetia must consider the complaint, appeal and make a decision no later than two months from the date of its filing” (Article 60, Chapter 10).

B. Level of fairness

1. Before polling day

Taking into account the information detailed above, it is clear that the competitive political arena had been largely drained of potential opponents of the ruling party. United Ossetia was accused of “abuse of administrative resources” ([Civil.ge, 2019](#)), including “generous media coverage” throughout the campaign period, “dwarfing that of other political parties” (Ibid). This involved meetings between leader Anatoly Bibilov and Russian officials.²¹ Furthermore, just a few days before the elections, several government websites relayed a “sociological” study, claiming that the United Ossetia party was leading by a wide margin. The leader of the Nykhas party, David Sanakoev, considered such publications to be “unfair competition” from the ruling party and “attempts to manipulate public opinion” ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)). Consequently, the opposition parties

²¹ On March 6, 2022, the South Ossetian president met Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin and Sergey Shoygu on May 27 in Moscow ([Civil.ge, 2019](#)).

did not campaign “on a relatively even footing” given the “highly uneven access to media” (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Furthermore, former South Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity interfered extensively in the elections without seeking a mandate. He was highly critical of Russian interference ([Open Caucasus media, 2019](#)) and the poisoning of the would-be-president Aslan Bzhania. Having pledged his support to the People's Party and the Communist Party, the former president is known to have returned to his homeland from Moscow and asked his supporters for their electoral loyalty in return for “generous gifts”, “expensive treatment abroad”, and “protection [...] from all sorts of dangers” ([PEC, 2019](#)). On the eve of the Day of Silence, 7 June 2019, Alexei Filatov, head of the Kremlin Department for Border Cooperation, arrived in South Ossetia, welcomed by Soslan Kokoev, State Adviser to the President on Domestic Policy. As a fervent opponent of Kokoity, this visit was perceived as “pressure on the electoral process” ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#))

Finally, this uneven playing field was further illustrated by the use of the “ethnic card” to remove certain candidates from the competition. The brother of the leader of the Nykhas party, Aleksey Sanakoev, was accused of having Georgian nationality. Although he showed a document issued by the Georgian Ministry of Justice refuting this accusation, the CEC refused to consider the evidence ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)).²² Finally, just one week before the elections, the residents of Leningor were promised South Ossetian passports in exchange for their vote for the United Ossetia party's self-nominated candidate Spartak Driyaev, but the procedures were suddenly halted on 6 June 2019. United Ossetia, accused by other political parties of "bribing voters", pushed for the suspension of the issuance of passports ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)).

2. On polling day

On polling day, 9 June 2019, few incidents were reported and access to ballot boxes was relatively fair. However, the practice of home-voting cast doubt on the respect for the "secrecy of the ballot" (Elklit & Svensson, 1997). The law permits the ballot paper to be signed by “another voter” ([PEC, 2019](#)) if the elector is unable to do so, and for this to happen a simple oral notification must be made to the electoral commission.

²² The main opposition party Nykhas has been the target of major accusations, resulting in the exclusion of three party members by the CEC for allegedly obscure reasons (alleged Georgian citizenship, lack of proof of residence, use of the wrong documents to register candidates, etc.) ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)).

3. After polling day

The election results were strongly criticised by the opposition, which noted some of the violations described above ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2019](#)). The Nykhas party spoke about elections “characterized by illegal actions”, among them bribery, use of administrative resources by the ruling party and pressure on candidates, therefore assessing the election results as “unreliable”. For its part, the CEC deemed it unnecessary to revise the results.

C. Conclusion

The South Ossetian parliamentary elections proved to be neither free nor fair according to the minimum threshold described above. The elections were not free since the confused and changing legal framework created major obstacles to entry into the competition, the CEC consistently and arbitrarily rejected candidates, and the media was controlled with an iron fist by the ruling party. Nor were the elections fair as the electorate was subjected to numerous threats such as the withdrawal of passports and the party then in power, United Ossetia, widely abused its access to administrative resources so as to curtail political competition for the arbitrarily selected candidates.

II. Abkhazia

Chapter 2 highlighted the rather simple and widespread legal access to political competition, televised debates and airtime divided fairly between the candidates, and the prompt publication of results by the CEC in accordance with the law (up to seven days after the end of the elections, Article 35, Chapter 4). Nevertheless, a number of incidents during the most recent elections cast doubt on the assertion in Article 1 of the Constitution that “elections to the Parliament of the Republic of Abkhazia are general, equal, direct and free” (Article 1, Chapter 1).

A. Level of freedom

Researchers who covered elections in Abkhazia reported genuine democratic development until 2014 with the election of Khajimba. Abkhazia generally stood out for its independent press, strong civil society and competitive elections (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2008; 2013). The elections were characterised by “real opposition candidates” who “enjoy[ed] prospects of success” (Ó Beacháin, 2012). The results were unpredictable and “it has been possible to have power transferred between government and opposition” (Ibid). The 2007 parliamentary elections were “hotly contested” (Ibid),

and those in 2012 revealed a high level of competition with only 13 candidates winning a seat in the first round. The high turnover of MPs was widely exhibited as demonstrating the degree of competition (Ó Beacháin, 2012; 2015; Kopeček & al, 2016), as well as “levels of pluralism in the political debates”(Popescu, 2006). Despite the competitive aspect of the elections being confirmed again in 2022, the level of freedom appeared largely questionable, confirming the political trajectory adopted since 2014.

1. Before polling day

The legal barriers to entry into the political arena (Diamond, 2002) for the 2022 parliamentary elections were relatively low, but contradicted several articles of the law, for example, through the election of candidates without a clean criminal record, in direct contradiction with Article 2, Chapter 1 of the law, which states that “citizens with an unexpunged criminal record [...] may not be elected”. Beslan Avidzba, for instance, was registered after committing no less than “eight episodes of theft of company property on an especially large scale using his official position by misappropriation and embezzlement” ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2022](#)). Another adopted measure, although only coming into force for the 2027 elections, will contribute to a difficulty in legally gaining access to political competition moving forward. In the run-up to the second round of voting, the deputies amended the law on elections, making it compulsory to speak both Abkhaz and Russian to stand for election as a deputy, a requirement which had previously been in place only for presidential candidates. This ruling would appear to be a direct challenge to Section 2 of Chapter 1 of the “Act on the Election of Members”, which states that “it is prohibited to restrict the rights of citizens to participate in elections on the basis of (...) language”. This decision was vehemently condemned by Moscow ([Интерфакс, 2022](#)) who considered it a threat to the Russian language, to which the Abkhazian Foreign Minister Inal Ardzinba retorted that "the current legislation in Abkhazia (...) allow all citizens to use the Russian language to the maximum and without hindrance in all spheres of activity” ([Civil.ge, 2022](#)).

The 2022 elections also failed to satisfy the principle of freedom for candidates and supporters of political parties to campaign (Diamond, 2002). Shortly following the rally on 21 December 2021, several members of the opposition were arrested (Komakhia, 2022), some of whom had been appointed candidates by opposition groups ahead of the elections, leading some political analysts to note that the correlation was unequivocal in the arrest of candidates and the “very high chances of getting into parliament” ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2022](#)). This example was an illustration of the significant coercive capacity of the state (Levitsky & Way, 2010), as well as how the government utilised the

resources at its disposal to pursue political objectives and cement its hold on power. Soon after the rally, from 27 January to 5 February, the State Security Service of Abkhazia conducted “the first joint Abkhaz-Russian anti-terrorist exercises” ([Sputnik, 2022](#)) alongside the Russian FSB in the capital Sukhum/i as helicopters criss-crossed the airspace and simulated explosions. Although this episode was presented by the authorities as practice to prevent a scenario of “a government building with hostages taken by terrorists” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)), the exercise appeared as a demonstration of force and of Russia's military support for the Bzhania government. As a result of the rally, the main opposition party, the Forum of National Unity of Abkhazia, decided not to nominate candidates. Viewed by some as a boycott, this was an example of “extra-institutional” actions (Levitsky & Way, 2010) developed by political parties in competitive authoritarian regimes as an effort “to undermine [the elections] domestic or international legitimacy”. Analysis of written sources did not reveal any blatant intimidation of voters (Diamond, 2002). However, it is important to bear in mind the clan-based organisation of Abkhaz society, where the vote is often seen as a bargaining chip for protection and the delivery of everyday goods. On a day-to-day basis, this actualised into incidents of fraud (Diamond, 2002) as the CEC turned a blind eye to the financial aspect of candidates' campaigns which led to blatant vote-buying. Many “goodies” were distributed ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)), such as “money”, “food”, and ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)) sometimes extending to “repaired roads, premises, installed transformers” (Ibid). These recurring actions, at times barely veiled, triggered a wave of protests, particularly on 21 January, led by several veterans of the Patriotic War of the people of Abkhazia from the Tkuarchal and Gudauta regions. They marched towards the CEC headquarters and left a sack of flour inscribed with the words “No to bribery!” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)). They condemned “the distribution of flour received as humanitarian aid from the governor of the Krasnodar Territory”, calling it an act of bribery to lure voters just before the elections ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)).

Overall, candidates had a level playing field during the election campaign, with freedom of speech, movement, assembly and association respected (Diamond, 2002). The media was able to express itself widely and voters were able to share their opinions both on social networks and during interviews organised by journalists, without any arrests. Nevertheless, the very specific context of the health crisis “sharply limited the possibilities for holding meetings of candidates with voters” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)) and has therefore called into question the validation of results.²³

²³ Part of the literature has focused on the autocratic excesses justified by the effort to tackle the COVID-19 health crisis. See: [Roth 2020](#); [Thomson & C. Ip, 2020](#); and [Slipowitz, 2021](#).

2. On polling day

Elklit and Svensson (1997) recall the imperative that everyone should be able to take part in the election, but on voting day in the 2022 parliamentary elections in Abkhazia a number of shortcomings were reported. Firstly, in a considerable number of polling stations, no less than 11 out of 23 sites observed by the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, the requisite conditions of comfort were not met, making access difficult if not impossible for the elderly and people with reduced mobility ([Апсныпресс, 2022](#)). Additionally, the law permitted "voting-at-home" for people who were unable to go to the polling station for health or "other" reasons (Article 31, Chapter 4). This can only be done on polling day after the voter has submitted a request to the precinct's election commission. Two members of this commission then go to the voter's home with a portable ballot box sealed in advance, the vote is cast, and the portable ballot box is finally taken to the polling station in the electoral district (Ibid). However, this practice has proved rather flawed. With a number of incidents reported, when, for example "citing lack of time", the precinct election commission "did not visit 12 voters with a ballot box and did not provide these citizens with the opportunity to vote at home, in accordance with their appeals the day before" ([ЭХО Кавказа, 2022](#)).

3. After polling day

According to the Abkhaz constitution, candidates are entitled to "legal possibilities of complaint" (Elklit & Svensson, 1997) with possible appeal to the courts. The decision of the Election Commission on the election results "may be appealed to the Supreme Court of the Republic of Abkhazia within five days from the date of the decision" (article 19, chapter 2). The Supreme Court's decision "can be appealed in cassation" (Ibid). This has been illustrated several times in Abkhazia when, for example, the Court was seized in 2019 after the CEC declared Raul Khajimba's victory, the opposition deeming the number of votes insufficient.

B. Level of fairness

Elections in Abkhazia have uniformly been described as unfair, with "an obsession with protecting the titular nation" (Ó Beacháin, 2015) and non-Abkhaz ethnic groups consistently under-represented. In 2014, the presidential elections were described as a turning point in the political trajectory of Abkhazia, with a disenfranchisement of ethnic Georgians from the Gal/i region and the strengthening of the Abkhaz vote. The competition was "dirty and struck by violence" (Kopeček & al, 2016) and had been steadily consolidated until the most recent presidential elections. In 2019,

the would-be-president, Aslan Bzhania, was forced to withdraw from the political competition while hospitalised from an attempted poisoning, taking the level of violence to a whole new level (JAMnews, 2019; [Радио Свободная Европа, 2020](#)).

1. Before polling day

A substantial segment of the population is denied the right to vote, thereby confirming an “uneven electoral playing field” (Levistky & Way, 2010). Most of the Gal/i residents, “who hold Georgian citizenship, remained ineligible to vote, as Abkhazian citizenship was stripped off them several years ago” ([Open Caucasus media, 2022](#); [Апсныпресс, 2022](#)). It is worth noting that the inclusion of the ethnic Georgian population of the Gal/i region was fiercely debated during the election campaign. David Pilia, head of the public association “Congress of the People of Abkhazia” claimed on 28 January 2023 that “a child who was born on the territory of Abkhazia is our child, and we should never give it away” ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)), which prompted a strong reaction, in particular from Socrates Dzhindzholiya, member of the Public Chamber of Abkhazia, who recounted the collaboration between the people of Gal/i and the Georgian authorities in the 1990s.

2. On polling day

On polling day, several episodes of organised ballot stuffing at some polling stations were reported, and “they undoubtedly made some candidates victory” more likely ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)). In addition, “not all ballot boxes in the polling stations were sealed properly”, “not all ballots were signed at all polling stations by the time they were opened” (Ibid) and “in four polling stations, voting booths were installed in such a way that election observers did not have a direct view of the booths” ([Апсныпресс, 2022](#)) resulting in voters’ attempts to take photographs of the ballot boxes. Moreover, voting booths were without curtains ([Эхо Кавказа, 2022](#)), a feature designed to ensure that voters are more within sight of observers, to prevent photographs being taken of voting ballots, and to avoid the so-called “carousel” voting scheme. However, this process in reality considerably reduced the level of privacy and may have therefore discouraged some voters from selecting a particular candidate under the pressure of observers when everyone knows everyone. It therefore calls into question the principles of secrecy of the ballot and absence of intimidation of voters (Elklit & Svensson, 1997). Finally, several electricity blackouts during the counting of votes occurred, whereas the CEC had said such events would not occur ([Sputnik, 2022](#); [Кавказский узел, 2022](#)).

3. After polling day

Overall, the results were accepted by all the candidates and reported in accordance with the law no less than seven days after election day (Article 35, Chapter 4). It should be noted, however, that only two women were admitted, Rashida Ayba and Alisa Gularia, limiting the principle of equal gender representation.²⁴

C. Conclusion

The election campaign, despite poor investment in the holding of debates, was competitive and seemed to have confirmed previous assertions regarding the high level of political jockeying during Abkhazian elections. Candidates were given equal rights to campaign, the media conveyed the voices of the various candidates and the electorate was free to express its opinions, supported by comments from civil society that were sometimes sharply critical of undemocratic practices. Nevertheless, these elections cannot be described as free, with major episodes of bribery and abuse of administrative resources by the ruling party. Nor can they be described as fair, with ethnic Georgians from Gal/i barred from voting, ballot stuffing and a serious risk of pressure on polling day. The 2022 parliamentary elections seem to have confirmed the trend towards an exponential ethnicisation of politics. This was further exacerbated by the passing of a law which will enter into force in 2027 requiring a mastery of the Abkhaz language for the role of MP. Furthermore, whilst the 2005 parliamentary elections and the 2011 presidential elections were deemed to be “very competitive”, “very respectful” and “democratic” (Researcher n°6), in 2022 the government’s demonstration of force alongside the Russian troops and the excessive use of administrative resources by the ruling party seemed to have signaled a halt in the democratisation process and the presidentialisation of the regime, thus further supporting the need to rethink the concept of “transition”.

An analysis of the level of freedom and fairness of elections in Abkhazia and South Ossetia allows a number of conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, it should be recalled that Abkhazia and South Ossetia have continuously held elections since declaring independence. As well as being a means of asserting their statehood with institutions and a government, de facto states have often used elections as a justification for claiming international recognition. Secondly, the Abkhaz and South Ossetian electoral processes differ in several respects. There were fewer incidents on voting day in

²⁴ For more literature on the representation of women in politics in de facto states, see Donnacha Ó Beacháin 2012, 2017; Karolina Ó Beacháin and Stefańczak Eileen Connolly, 2015.

South Ossetia than in Abkhazia. This can be explained by the preliminary selection carried out by the CEC in the former, which considerably reduced the risk of opposition voting. Similarly, episodes of bribery appeared less prevalent in South Ossetia during the campaign period since the fears imposed on the electorate and the biased selection prior to the campaign do not make voting an object of concern. In Abkhazia, on the other hand, the legal barriers were relatively low, which posed a real risk of defeat for the ruling party. All of this was set against a backdrop of clientelism where the vote is a badge of loyalty. Thus, where bribery was more prevalent, so was political competition. Entry into political competition in Abkhazia is relatively free but not fair, while it is neither free nor fair in South Ossetia. Nevertheless, the two de facto states also shared similarities. Both of them were characterised by the ruling party's abuse of the administrative resources at its disposal, the use of the ethnic factor to threaten, exclude or motivate segments of the population, and also the use, albeit limited, of Russian curators.

It should also be noted that applying a certain threshold to determine whether elections are free and fair in de facto states is more complicated than for recognised ones. Firstly, the absence of recognition prevents the presence of official monitoring missions, leaving more room for illegal practices. "Fake" observers are sometimes offered bribes and their lack of experience leads to biased results. In addition, some de facto states are subject to major intrusion attempts by the patron state, which has a considerable impact on the level of freedom and fairness through rigged results and threats if their preferred candidate is not elected. The parent state also plays an important role in that it delegitimises de facto regimes and the denunciation of their elections is not based on whether or not they satisfied democratic criteria, but on their illegality.

III. The significance of elections in the discussion of the political regime: initial attempts at labelling

As has already been pointed out when conceptualising "democracy", the concept of electoral democracy has long since been disproven in that elections provide only a superficial understanding of the democratic nature of a regime, something which Kubicek demonstrated in his study of the 1998 parliamentary and 1999 presidential elections in Ukraine. Indeed, while the population went to the polls, it was insufficient to speak of democracy when other factors such as the weakness of political parties and the oligarch's rise to power substantially marred this apparent democratic façade (Kubicek, 2001). Whilst a democratic regime cannot be defined solely by the holding of elections, the latter are nonetheless the indispensable component for a regime to be considered democratic. In the view of Merkel (2004), "the electoral regime" is the core element of democracy,

which is constituted of “five partial regimes”, since it “is the most obvious expression of the sovereignty of the people” (Ibid). This chapter aimed at an initial proposition on the regime type in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The interviews conducted for this research revealed a “trend” in the South Caucasus. Whilst “a lot of characteristics you see in Georgian politics are in Abkhaz politics as well” (Researcher n°4), comparisons with Georgia were repeatedly made to demonstrate that “competition is very dirty” and in this regard “it does not really differ from essentially the rest of the Caucasus” (Ibid). More broadly, “problems [that] the Georgians have [...], exist just as much if not more... [...] strongly in Abkhazia” (Researcher n°6). Among the “problems” highlighted by the experts interviewed were social conservatism, a patriarchal system and anti-LGBTQ+ stances. These major problems considerably impact on the freedom and the fairness of elections. Nevertheless, beyond these common denominators, Abkhazia and South Ossetia would appear to have forged two very distinct political regimes.

A. Abkhazia's genuine attempt to democratise and the limits of the term “ethnocracy”

According to its constitution, Abkhazia is “a sovereign, democratic state governed by the rule of law” (Article 1, Chapter 1) and a “presidential republic” ([Администрация Президента Республики Абхазия](#)).

In general terms, the state features of Abkhazia were stressed on a number of occasions throughout the interviews, as “real politics in a real statelet” (Researcher n°1) allowing for “the potential to function as a state” (Ibid). In Abkhazia, there is a “high level of competition” (Researcher n°4) and that competition is “much more organised to some extent” (International expert n°3) than in South Ossetia. The “parliament has its own voice in politics” (International expert n°2) and political debates actually tend to revolve around “healthcare, education, roads, salaries, pensions, local issues, individual concerns as you would expect in a normal election” (Researcher n°6) and not about Russia or Georgia, as shown in Chapter 2. Furthermore, candidates “often don't get elected on the first count” (Ibid). In 2022, in the first round of elections, only 17 out of 35 candidates were elected. However, these elections confirmed that such arguments must be handled cautiously, given that part of the opposition was subjected to considerable pressure, sometimes preventing it from taking a stand against the ruling party. The opposition was branded as “haphazard” and “fuzzy” (Researcher n°4), the outcome of a “very personalised” (Researcher n°7) political life. Political parties are “relatively weak” (Researcher n°4) and elections are mainly about “personal rivalries”

(Ibid). Yet it would be an oversimplification to see the opposition as a shambolic mass. The parliamentary elections in 2022 and the political rally the previous winter showed how the opposition could exert pressure on the regime and on several occasions led to a government reshuffle, a symbol of firm unity.²⁵ Additionally, the presence of opposition parties in Abkhazia is evidenced by the media's coverage of various fraudulent activities. Since opposition forces “are always looking to get into power [...] they would be the first to complain if there was something wrong” (Researcher n°6). Finally, the weak institutionalisation of political parties was again characterised as “a noticeable feature which is not again unique to Abkhazia” (Researcher n°6), supporting a wider understanding of the conduct of elections in the South Caucasus. This low level of institutionalisation is the result of a number of factors, including the Soviet legacy of a personalistic approach to power, based on “local” and “individualistic” (Researcher n°1) clientelism relationships.²⁶

Although the assessment above would seem to refute this argument, it would seem that the freedom of elections is a source of debate. Respondents were reluctant to take a position, speaking of “more or less free” (International expert n°2) elections, favouring the use of “would”, and that they are “normally” (International expert n°3) “more free and fair in Abkhazia” (Ibid & Researcher n°7). It has only been pointed out once that this assessment depends primarily on the definition of democracy applied, indeed “if you perceive democracy as a chain, then it's [...] a serious problem to speak about Abkhazia as a democratic polity” (Researcher n°4). At the same time, it has been argued that if elections are not fair - “very patriarchal” (Researcher n°6), candidates are being intimidated (Researcher n°7), the ruling party abuses of use of the state “ресурсы” (Researcher n°4), the debate on the level of freedom remains open when “the manipulation with voting the ballots are very limited” (Researcher n°4). The analysis of electoral fraud in the 2022 elections promptly refutes this assertion which, moreover, seems to leave room for electoral infringement which, although “very limited”, recognises the manipulation of votes (Diamond, 2002). Furthermore, although the purpose of the elections in Abkhazia was “to determine who will govern” and not “to give some legitimacy to a dictator” (Researcher n°6), the discrepancy between the electorate's intentions and the materialisation of its choice is open to criticism when, once again, acts of electoral fraud are reported – penalising the opposition and thus the electorate's agency. The analysis of these initial empirical results revealed the superficial quality of studies on the holding of elections in Abkhazia, which was largely mirrored in attempts to apply a label to them.

²⁵ It would appear, however, that presidential power has been reinforced in Abkhazia with a more tightly controlled opposition and, notably, a stronger anti-NGO stance. E.g latest visit by Minister Inal Ardzinba in Moscow ([Эхо Кавказа, 2023](#)). His remarks provoked widespread public outrage.

²⁶ Georgian politics is also typified by its highly personalised political life, with strong figures (Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, Saakashvili) from which only the ruling party seems to stand out, and an opposition that is struggling to find its way, resorting to public demonstrations.

Abkhazia has been described as being among the “hybrid regimes” (Researcher n°4) and more commonly as an ethnocracy (International expert n°2, Researchers n°6 and n°7) insofar as “elections [are] for the Abkhaz” (Researcher n°6). The rejection of the democratic nature of the Abkhaz regime was widely justified by the population of the Gal/i region, which, retaining Georgian citizenship, are unable to take part in the political life. Nevertheless, “this is not something unique to Abkhazia” (Researcher n°6). Proficiency in the Abkhaz language is compulsory in order to qualify for the presidency, as is the case in some Central Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan (Ó Beacháin, 2012). While Abkhazia's political life has been deemed competitive, the opposition in Kazakhstan is fiercely muzzled.²⁷ In Abkhazia, the fact that the opposition is permitted access to the political arena thus seems to reject the idea of a “strongly authoritarian regime where the opposition has no chance to be successful” (Researcher n°7). The available literature has spoken of Abkhazia and its “ethnocratic nature” (Bakke & al, 2014), as an “ethnically defined state entity” (Trier & al, 2010), and being either an “ethnocracy or exclusive democracy” (Kopeček & al, 2016). The scientific problem here lies in that, for some researchers, the ethnic feature is the most important criterion and, once it is solved, “the democratic picture in Abkhazia would look good by regional standards” (Popescu, 2006). The ethnic criterion, although fundamental, appears reductive in the labelling of the Abkhaz political regime given that other important violations in the chain of democracy have been reported. This research therefore favours the term “competitive authoritarian regime”, as it underscores the competitive aspect of elections without denying the autocratic nature of them, in which unfair access to the political arena for a segment of the population is embedded. The “competition [that] is real but unfair” (Levitsky & Way, 2010), and despite episodes of electoral fraud which “may alter the outcome of elections, it is not severe as to make the act of voting meaningless” (Ibid). In Abkhazia, the vote has a genuine significance for the candidate who resorts to bribery to influence its outcome. Elections are competitive, but unfair access to the political arena, episodes of electoral fraud and the excessive use of administrative resources by the ruling party confirm the autocratic element of the holding of elections.

The difficulty of labelling the Abkhaz regime was also reflected in the differing perceptions. The elections are regarded as free and fair “from [the] Abkhaz point of view” (International expert n°2) and “the majority who lived in Abkhazia considered the political system to be legitimate for them” (Researcher n°6). It would appear that in Abkhazia's practice of democracy, there is a form of

²⁷ The Kazakh regime's policy of "Kazakhisation" has also been referred to in terms of ethnocracy.

genuineness that rejects the idea of a façade democracy. In a façade regime, “you pretend you are a democracy but you are not and you know that you are not” and “this is not the case in Abkhazia” (Researcher n°4). Furthermore, several respondents justified the ethnically motivated statehood project by a genuine fear of once again becoming a minority and replaced. Post-Kosovo speculations that the desire for democratic elections in Abkhazia were “very much about seeking acknowledgement from the rest of the world” (International expert n°3) seem to have been invalidated, thereby reiterating the significant risk of methodological bias in assessing the level of democracy.

B. South Ossetia: “Plato’s cave” (Researcher n°7)

The South Ossetian constitution defines itself as “a sovereign democratic state governed by the rule of law” (Article 1, Chapter 1). However, unlike Abkhazia, researchers and experts seem to have unanimously agreed on its lack of any democratic features.

First and foremost, it is crucial to appreciate the difficulty in gaining access to South Ossetia, which is “very closed”, like a “black box” (Researcher n°7) and where everything seems “more opaque” (Researcher n°1). The South Ossetian political system is “very weak” and “disoriented” (International expert n°2). Moreover, it is “very much connected to Russia” and the Russian FSB is particularly active, with several interviewees stressing that South Ossetian politicians are “waiting for instructions from Moscow” (International expert n°2). The law “is very similar to the Russian law”²⁸ and this has prompted a preference for the terminology of “puppet state” or “puppet government” (Researcher n°4).

Furthermore, any debate on the level of freedom and fairness has been rejected outright: there is “no sign of competition there” and to compare the level of freedom or fairness with Abkhazia “doesn’t matter” since there are “no political entities, only the ruling party and its satellites” (International expert n°2). A significant contribution to the literature on de facto states was made by John Ishiyama and Anna Batta, who focused specifically on the party system, explaining why in some de facto states a “dominant party” policy prevails when in others there is a genuine political competition (2012), all rooted in a reflection on the state of democracy. Interviewees expressed precious little on the type of political regime in South Ossetia, barring that they had not already

²⁸ The adoption of a return to the mixed system in 2018 was justified by a similar measure adopted in Russia ([Парламент Республики Южная Осетия](#)), not to mention the law on “foreign partners” adopted in 2014 ([РЕС. 2014](#)) which, despite using different terminology, replicates the one on “foreign agents” adopted in 2012 by the Russian Duma.

swept aside any recognition of its statehood. The political institutions were best described as “not democratic” or ironically with “the same level of democracy that you have in Russia” (Researcher n°4). The fact that the authorities “did not give permission for other political subjects to participate in elections” (International expert n°2) confirmed the unfree aspect of the elections, whilst the systemic and informal rejection of women underscores some of their unfairness (Researchers n°6 & n°7).

Therefore, “with its informal power structures and deep penetration by the Kremlin” ([Civil.ge, 2019](#)), the complexity of labelling the South Ossetian regime is mounting. The concept of “façade” appears relevant in that the authorities openly claim to operate in a democratic state²⁹ by resorting to autocratic methods. The façade aspect was thoroughly illustrated through the “international observers” whose work was deemed to be illegitimate and as a mere “intent to mimic legitimate international election monitoring” (Shekhovtsov, 2019). The case of South Ossetia brings back the initial difficulties set out at the beginning of this research: the challenge of labelling regimes that fall in the middle of the continuum. Whilst the concept of electoral authoritarianism is contestable when the criterion of candidates who “are not predetermined by external structures” (Schedler, 2015) is once again being called into question by Russian interference, it would seem that describing the South Ossetian regime as competitive authoritarian is just as problematic. Indeed, in competitive authoritarian regimes “opposition parties are not legally barred from contesting” (Levitsky & Way, 2010). As evidenced by the 2019 parliamentary elections, the opposition has little access to the campaign arena and, when it does, it finds itself subjected to unfair treatment by ostensibly democratic regulatory bodies such as the CEC. It would seem that South Ossetia is joining the list of fully authoritarian regimes, in which “formal democratic institutions exist on paper but are reduced to façade status in practice” (Ibid).³⁰ Whilst Thomas de Waal has defined the entity as a “closed semi-authoritarian society” (de Waal 2019), a more in-depth investigation will allow for a further specification of the type of autocratic regime in South Ossetia.

²⁹ A special effort is made, for example, with the “fake” international observers who stress the fair, free, competitive and democratic nature of the elections.

³⁰ Levitsky and Way (2010) identify two types of authoritarian regime: “closed regimes”, in which “democratic channels do not exist”, and “hegemonic regimes”, in which democratic institutions are present but only on the surface.

C. Conclusion

Since this research has focused on a single criterion of democracy, the holding of free and fair elections, and has rejected a minimal definition of democracy, it does not seek to provide a label for the Abkhaz and South Ossetian political regimes when freedom of the press, accountability mechanisms or respect for human rights are equally essential criteria. Nonetheless, the study of the elections has made it possible to put forward several explanatory factors. Whilst South Ossetia, with its rejection of the opposition and its façade of democratic regulatory bodies, seems to embrace the criteria of a hegemonic authoritarian regime, the discussion is more complex for Abkhazia. Abkhazia does not fulfil the attributes of a completely autocratic regime given its high level of competition and a meaningful vote that offers the opposition a genuine chance of winning. Nor does it meet the criteria of a democratic regime, as its elections are neither free nor fair. The use of the prefix “ethno” has received academic consensus and illustrates an undeniable salient reality. Nevertheless, the broader concept of a “competitive authoritarian regime” seems to apply better in that it confers on Abkhazia the credit of a real place for the opposition without, however, justifying its exclusion from the list of democratic regimes solely because of its exclusionary ethnic political project.

IV. General conclusion

The assessment of the level of freedom and fairness of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian parliamentary elections has enabled a number of essential points to be highlighted for further discussion on the labelling of their political regimes. South Ossetia and Abkhazia both have elections that are neither free nor fair, but while the level of competition is high in Abkhazia, it is largely restricted in South Ossetia by using ostensibly democratic structures to justify its arbitrary policy. In reality, this façade conceals an authoritarian style of government in which threats, trumped-up charges and blackmail are used to crush any attempts to overthrow the ruling party. Abkhazia has revealed a more sincere desire to carry out its elections within a favourable legal framework for an opposition whose voice is relayed and free to meet the electorate. However, while a significant segment of the population, mainly in the ethnic Georgian region of Gal/i, is denied access to the political arena, refuting the fairness of the elections, this is not the only breach of democracy. There have been numerous episodes of electoral fraud, the opposition remains subject to greater uncertainty, and the ruling party makes excessive use of administrative resources. In this respect, to speak of a competitive authoritarian regime would appear to be working more towards a convergence of the two literatures – on de facto states and democracy – by favouring the equal importance of each democratic criterion.

Chapter 4 - Explanatory factors for regime discrepancies

Drawing upon a comparative case study of the levels of freedom and fairness during the latest parliamentary elections in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the overall aim of this heuristic study is to develop a new theory, the components of which will be set out in this chapter. The existing literature on de facto states has thus far examined factors that encouraged or hindered democratisation (Popescu, 2006; Tansey, 2007; Caspersen 2008; 2011, Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012; Smolnik, 2012; Von Steinsdorff & Fruhstorfer, 2012; Kopeček, 2017), though sometimes too cursorily to enable the theorisation of empirical results. The main factors previously addressed were the length of time a de facto state has existed, its lack of recognition, cultural homogeneity, the presence of external threats, the violence of the conflicts and the fear of renewed hostilities. The interviews conducted as a part of this research highlighted possible factors for explaining the contrasting paths taken by Abkhazia and South Ossetia, leading to the emergence of seven hypotheses related to the geography of the territory (H1), the state of the economy (H2), the Soviet legacy (H3), nationalism (H4), patron state interference (H5), international aid for the development of civil society (H6) and independence aspirations (H7). None of these elements can be considered in isolation; like a chain, they assemble and complement each other to explain the political divergences.

H1 - Geographical data



Kolossov, Vladimir, and John O'Loughlin. 'Violence in the Caucasus: Economic Insecurities and Migration in the "De Facto" States of Abkhazia and South Ossetia'. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 52, no. 5 (2011):631-654. <http://doi.org/10.2747/1539-7216.52.5.631>.

- **Size and demography**

Many of the interviewees promptly raised the argument of territorial size and demography as a key factor distinguishing Abkhazia from South Ossetia. South Ossetia covers an area of around 3,900km² “the smallest of the four Eurasian de facto states in population and physical size” (Toal & O’Loughlin, 2013). It is a “small territory” (International expert n°3 & Researcher n°6), where “everybody knows each other” (International expert n°3) and “it is easier to make influence on a small entity” (International expert n°2). In contrast, Abkhazia “is obviously a lot larger” (Researcher n°1) with a territory of 8,600km² (Auch, 2005). Due to its small size, South Ossetia, had been “more much impacted after 2008 in terms of the consequences from the destruction” (International expert n°3). Two major implications of the entity's small size are the delocalisation of its political activities with “a lot of the discussions (...) actually taking place in North Ossetia” (International expert n°3), and the shrinking of the public space “where people could meet other than at home” (Ibid) and “limited [...] safe space” (Ibid). According to the interviewees, it is also “related to the size of the population” (Researcher n°1). South Ossetia’s latest census in 2015 recorded a total of 53,532 inhabitants ([Республика Южная Осетия Управление государственной статистики, 2016](#)) while Abkhazia has a population of approximately 244,236, according to figures published on January 1, 2022 ([Управление государственной статистики Республики Абхазия, 2023](#)). For South Ossetia, “most of the people are living in the North Caucasus” (Researcher n°7), in particular “educated people” (Ibid), the result of a post-conflict brain drain. The size argument has been pushed so far as to link it to the absence of civil society (International expert n°2) or even independence, “you cannot have an independent state in this environment between Georgia and Russia, it’s so small population” (Researcher n°7).

This first hypothesis as an explanatory element in democratisation has been widely discussed in the literature, yet requires a contemporary revival. The original authors, Plato and Aristotle, asserted that the smaller the territory, the more the people “share a common base of interest and also, by necessity, a common destiny” (Anckar, 2008). Arend Lijphart, in his 1977 book *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* emphasised the spirit of cohesion created by the smallness of the territory, which thus reduces the obstacles to decision-making and eases the governance of the territory. On the other hand, Dahl and Tufte in their book *Size and Democracy* (1973) nuanced the effect of smallness on democratic participation, asserting that it “is also assumed to generate attitudinal homogeneity and less competitive elections, which, in turn, would decrease incentives for electoral participation” (Dahl & Tufte, 1973 quoted in Anckar, 2008). The literature on de facto states has paid scant tribute to the importance of territorial size and population.

Kolstø & Blakkisrud in their article “De facto states and democracy: The case of Nagorno-Karabakh” (2012) drew on Anckar's theory that micro-states, particularly islands, given their isolation, had to rely on their own resources, creating a "spirit of fellowship and community" (Anckar, 2010 quoted in Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012), a theory that they then applied to Nagorno-Karabakh due to its resemblance to “a landlocked ‘island’”. Although it satisfies the territorial enclave criteria, South Ossetia invalidates Anckar's theory, with a climate that has been demonstrated to be rather unfavourable to democratisation. South Ossetia’s size has generally been mentioned in debates on the presence or absence of a statehood, rendering it the de facto state “least successful in establishing state capacity” (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012). The size criterion was mentioned in the empirical test of the Montevideo criteria but was not developed further into a more substantive understanding of the details of South Ossetian political life.

Whilst “demography is at the heart of these conflicts” (Caspersen, 2011), this measuring tool has frequently been approached with regard to the ethnic question in Abkhazia, where the Abkhaz state project continues to hinder its democratisation with restrictive citizenship laws (Clogg, 2008; Trier & al, 2010).³¹ Whilst the majority of Ossetians live in North Ossetia, no in-depth study has looked at the impact on South Ossetia's political development, which is itself being called into question since its political activities have been partially delocalised. Tomas Hoch (2020) asserted that South Ossetian authorities “consider the size of the population in the de facto republic to be too small to build an independent, self-sufficient nation state”. In their survey of attitudes, Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin (2013) briefly highlighted the declining population as a justifying factor for making it “a most unlikely candidate for independent statehood”.

• **Location and climate**

Geographical location and climate were also mentioned for their impact on the practice of democracy. South Ossetia is nestled below the Great Caucasian Mountain Range and is surrounded by Georgia proper, with its northern border to Russia accessible via the Roki Tunnel to North Ossetia (Sammut & Dvetkovski, 1996). South Ossetian territory has been portrayed as desolate, “there is literally nothing” (Researcher n°4) and “not a lot going for it” (Researcher n°1). Its topography is “mountainous, [...] rugged” (Ibid) and being “surrounded by Georgia and with mountains of North Caucasus, there were no ways to develop without contacts with Georgians”

³¹ In 1989, the population was around 525,000 with 46% Georgian and 18% Abkhaz, before reversing and dropping drastically to 214,000 in 2003 with 44% Abkhaz and 19% Georgian. Around 200,000 people were expelled from Abkhazia following the war in the 1990s (Berg & Mölder, 2012). The ethnification of Abkhaz politics will be dealt with in hypothesis 4 on nationalism.

(International expert n°2). Its geographical isolation made it dependent on Georgia for a long time, with which it maintained very close links: socially, with mixed families; and economically, with the Ergneti market until its closure in 2004. Furthermore, its “closeness to Russia” has been associated to a closeness vis-à-vis “Russian elites” (International expert n°3), thus mobilising the literature on autocratic diffusion across the post-Soviet space. Abkhazia, on the other hand, was more quickly detached, and the interviews have revived the myth of the “Abkhazian utopia” (Sideri, 2012) with excessive meliorative adjectives: “stunning and beautiful” (Researcher n°1), “a tropical paradise” (Ibid) whose climate and geographical position proved advantageous during the imperial period. In addition, “historically Abkhazia has always had much more access to the rest of the world” (International expert n°3) making it easier to travel and exchange.

The geographical position of the post-Soviet states has been addressed by the existing literature, mainly with regard to the concept of democratic diffusion from the West (S. Kopstein & Reilly, 2000; Levitsky & Way, 2006; Tolstrup, 2014; Lankina & Getachew, 2006; Lankina & al 2016). Authors have argued that this geographic proximity is not sufficient in itself. Even if “being physically closer or belonging to a region [which] increase[s] the likelihood of norm convergence” (Ambrosio, 2010), Levitsky and Way (2007) have demonstrated with their concept of "linkage to the West" that this is in fact a more complex relationship. Indeed, “economic, political, organisational, social, and communication” links (Levitsky et Way, 2010) also contribute to strengthening democratic forces. The literature on de facto states has acknowledged the isolation of the two de facto territories, with Abkhazia being “isolated from the outside world geographically and politically” (Popescu, 2006) whilst the “small and weak South Ossetia” facing demographic decline has part of its “economic and political life...run out of the North Ossetian capital, Vladikavkaz” (de Waal, 2020). Cornell (2002) mentioned the geographical criteria as an explanatory factor of the frozen conflict, however, no in-depth study on the impact of such insulation on democratic development has been carried out. Through a series of correlations, it has been assumed that Abkhazia's privileged position and climate have enabled it to develop its tourism and agricultural sectors, thereby boosting its economy and making it less dependent on Russia. By contrast, South Ossetia has been assessed as isolated, devastated, and desolated. Being historically more connected to Georgia and with geographical and cultural proximity to North Ossetia having made it acutely vulnerable to Russian influence, the impact on the possible emergence of a civil society and an independent political life has been observable. This first discussion thus hypothesises that the smaller, more isolated and sparsely populated the de facto state, the less likely it is to democratise.

H2 - Economic growth to sustain democracy

"Building democracy without building free economy in the country, is it possible?" (International expert n°2).

The link between the nature of the economy and the potential for democratisation is not a new phenomenon. Abkhazia has "the potential for economics" (Researcher n°1). It has "a fertile soil so you can have a good agriculture" (Researcher n°4), mainly of citrus, tobacco, tea and hazelnut. Furthermore, "in the 1920's, (...) it started to become a place of recuperation, of resorts" (Researcher n°1) until it became an attractive "tourist center" (Ibid). Today, visitors "can perform this tourism to the Highland areas" and enjoy "the nice coast of the Black Sea" (Researcher n°4). Initially "an elite thing, for party members" (Researcher n°1), the practice has since been democratised, attracting "a much larger segment of the population" (Ibid), materialising in the massive urbanisation of the coastline where "modern *sanatoria*" and "block hotels" (Ibid) mushroomed. "During the Soviet period, Abkhazia was one of the most developed regions of the USSR, as a result of a favourable climate that allowed the region to foster tourism and an entire infrastructure network. However, the collapse of the USSR, its centrally planned economy, as well as the 1992-1993 war of secession (Ibid) and the Georgian-backed Commonwealth of Independent States' 1996 embargo have had disastrous consequences - "destruction, isolation, and lack of international recognition" (Blakkisrud & al, Kolstø; 2021) for the de facto entity's economy. The distressing transition resulted in a massive increase in corruption, "the proliferation of organized crime, new coping strategies and an expansion of the informal sector" (Ibid) and a slow and costly post-war reconstruction".³² Despite an attempt to revive its economy³³, Abkhazia remained largely isolated, and its few economic partners are not enough to allow for its emancipation from Moscow in the long term.

For its part, South Ossetia has a far less diversified economy. Described as "among the most difficult in the South Caucasus" (International Alert, 2004), it retains its post-Soviet status of a relatively "backward agricultural region" (Kolosov & O'Loughlin, 2011). Though the construction of the Roki Tunnel in 1974 was essential in strengthening its economic ties with North Ossetia, its industry is decayed and at a standstill, not to mention its labour force, some of which has migrated to North Ossetia. Recognition by Russia in 2008, resulted in a Georgian ban on trade with the "occupied territories", and earlier, the closure in 2004 of the Ergneti market, wiped out its economic

³² Extract taken from a course paper written by Marie Beslier (author of the thesis) as part of an academic semester at Ilia State University.

³³ E.g. In 2009, "about 60 percent of imports to Abkhazia [came] from Turkey, while about 45 percent of Abkhazia's exports [went] to Turkey" (Punsmann, 2009).

potential and drastically undermined the standard of living. Its imports depend almost entirely on Russia and its exports consist mainly of small quantities of fruits to Russia (Gerrits & Bader, 2016) with frequent incidents of corruption and misappropriation of funds, prompting threats from Moscow on more than one occasion. Recognition by Russia in 2008 led to a tripling of its annual budget, but while Moscow's objective in setting up a number of cooperation treaties (see Ambrosio & A.Lange, 2016) was to “decreas[e] the financial burden on Russia’s budget”(Kolosov & O’Loughlin, 2011),³⁴ South Ossetia has never been so dependent on Russia, with 86% of its annual budget coming directly from Moscow in 2018 (de Waal, 2019).

The literature has tackled the crucial component of understanding the relationship between the nature of the economy and the type of regime. Decades ago, Martin Lipset put forward his theory of modernisation, arguing that “economic growth is a prerequisite to democracy” (Lipset, 1959). Dahl’s *Polyarchy* (1971) affirmed that the chances a country will nurture and maintain a competitive political regime depend upon its socioeconomic development. However, such rhetoric has quieted as of late. First and foremost, the causal relationship is more supportive of economic development leading to democracy (E. Burkhart & S. Lewis-Beck, 1994) rather than the other way around. In his article “Democracy and Economic Development” (2004) Adam Przeworski states that “once democracy is established, for whatever reasons, its survival depends on a few, easily identifiable, factors” such as political institutions (Przeworski, 2004), international political factors, or domestic institutional factors (Heo & C. Tan Source, 2001). Hence, two explanations have emerged for the tendency to observe more democratic regimes in countries with developed economies: an endogenous explanation, based on the theory of modernisation; and, an exogenous explanation that modernisation favours the maintenance of democracy, but does not explain its origin. The economic criterion and its relationship to politics has been little discussed as regards the de facto states. Nevertheless, it has been acknowledged as an important component of statehood as it demonstrates the authorities capacity to provide its population with public goods (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008; Bakke & al 2018). Popescu (2006) argued that the fragmentation of the Abkhazian economy, concentrated in the hands of small independent entrepreneurs makes it less dependent on the authorities, therefore “the poorer Abkhazia scores better in terms of democracy” compared to Transnistria. Yet again, this hypothesis cannot be applied to South Ossetia and poses a number of challenges. While its economy can also be described as fragile and fragmented, this has, on the contrary, made it much more dependent on Moscow, which exercises its control more easily. Furthermore, the lack of control is often the result of a criminalisation of the economy, with a high

³⁴ Russia recently reiterated its desire to see Abkhazia and South Ossetia less financially dependent (see: [civil.ge, 2022](#)). The question remains, however, how when “lack of international recognition prevents (de facto states) from joining international trade regimes, pushing their economic interactions with the outside world into the ‘gray zones’ of semi-legal international trade” (Blakkisrud & al, 2021).

level of corruption and a strengthening of the black market to the detriment of overall economic well-being.

Economic growth should therefore be tested not as an explanatory factor for the emergence of a more democratic political life in Abkhazia, but rather for its relative survival. The case of South Ossetia suggests that other factors need to be considered, such as the level of economic independence and socio-economic inequalities when they “help to produce hegemonic regimes” (Dahl, 1971). Cut off from Georgian, South Ossetia had no choice but to turn to Moscow. Paradoxically, however, this allowed it to increase its budget without diversification and with autocratic but limited control that gave rise to an upsurge in corruption and illegal practices, ruining its economy and thus the chances of an egalitarian society. This second discussion thus hypothesises that the more economically developed and independent the de facto state, the more likely it is to sustain its democratic features.

H3 - Soviet legacy and autonomous status

After a brief period of independence from 1918 to 1921, Georgia fell under Soviet occupation until its declaration of independence in 1991. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, then with different legal statuses within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, developed different relations with Moscow, and certain characteristics of the Soviet system have had a direct affect on the way they approach politics today.

Firstly, interviewees specified the nature of this “Soviet legacy”. This period paved the way for the emergence of a “political elite” which was “very genuine”, “very authentic”, and nurtured an “authentic and homegrown wish for separating from Georgia” (International expert n°3). This elite gradually established itself as a “class” (Researcher n°4) which became “closely connected to mafia structures” (Ibid), embracing the idea that “you need resources to be elected (Ibid) with a “clan[nish] structure interconnected with organised crime” (Ibid). Meanwhile, whilst “this influence was very tangible”, a “new generation of people came to power” and as the latter had not experienced the Soviet era, the influence was “not as strong as before” (International expert n°2), although some Georgian experts still talk about “the smell of Soviet” (Ibid). Furthermore, the “Soviet period is a very mixed view” (Researcher n°6) and must be looked at in the context of a long history of myths and ethnic affirmation – “Abkhaz, like the Georgians (...) see themselves as an Ancient people, so Soviet time is just a passing phase” (Ibid). During the Soviet period, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were granted different legal statuses by the Soviet authorities, yet these

differences have not been analysed in relation to their contemporary political practice. Several researchers (Shnirelman, 2001; Cornell 2001; 2002) investigated the role of autonomous institutions in the outbreak of ethnic conflicts, arguing that when ethnic groups have been denied autonomy, conflict has been avoided (Cornell, 2001). Yet, how did the Soviet period influence the emergence and nature of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian political regimes?

In 1921, Abkhazia was proclaimed a Soviet Socialist Republic along with Georgia, and in 1922 the Abkhazian SSR joined the Georgian SSR as “equal republics” on the basis of a ‘Union Treaty’ then integrated into the Transcaucasian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic. In 1931, it became an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR (Blauvelt, 2014). Its favourable geography as well as the desire “to be rewarded” (Researcher n°1) for supporting the Bolsheviks’ invasion of 1921, enabled Abkhazia to benefit from “policies that were advantageous to get massive investments” (Ibid). One of the interviewees, referring to the memoirs of Akaki Mgeladze, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Abkhazia (1943-1951), explained how while “hanging out with Stalin”, he would say “we really need to have a modern railway going through Abkhazia”, and Stalin would reply “good idea, let’s invest in it, that will be done” (Ibid). Furthermore, informality and clientelism practices - “very personalistic”, “group-based”, “local” and “individualistic” (Ibid) - enabled the Abkhazian elites “to manipulate nationality policy and the structures of local institutions” in order “to gain control of patronage resources” (Blauvelt, 2014). The Stalinist period and the 1920s allowed “room for politics to emerge” (Researcher n°1). The constitution of the Abkhaz SSR promulgated in 1925 already referred to a domestic political organisation with a governing body, the Council of People’s Commissars, and significant political autonomy granted “outside of the jurisdiction of the Trans-Caucasus SFSR and the USSR” in the areas of “internal state legislation, judiciary, courts, criminal and civil legislation” ([Abkhaz World, 2009](#)). Although it was certainly not “pure electoral politics”, there were “candidates” with strong “positions”, materialising a “kind of activism” (Researcher n°1). Nevertheless, it was “kind of an anarchic situation” (Ibid), and Abkhazia remained subjected to substantial control by the central Soviet authorities, which increased as its legal status was downgraded, essentially imposing itself as a bargaining tool for Moscow in its relations with Tbilisi. Whilst the ethnic Abkhaz population had initially been privileged during the *Korenizatsiia*, Stalin, and subsequently Beria, overturned this situation with a policy of “Georgianisation of Abkhazia”, which after Beria’s death in 1953, led to the strengthening of a strong ethnic nationalism.

Concurrently, South Ossetia's demand for autonomous status was granted by the Bolshevik authorities in April 1922, thereby proclaiming it an autonomous oblast. This special status did not emancipate South Ossetia from the control of the Georgian authorities, nor did it guarantee it any kind of political independence, leaving it with “limited autonomy” (International expert n°3). South Ossetian authorities were “fully dependent on Tbilisi” (International expert n°2) and the “culture centre was Tbilisi” (Ibid). Unlike Abkhazia, South Ossetia “lacked a strong identity” and “South Ossetians were well integrated into Soviet Georgia, with high levels of inter-marriage” (de Waal, 2019). Nevertheless, while few authors have described the Soviet period as infertile for statehood (Toal & O’Loughlin, 2013), it made possible the emergence of political institutions such as “a parliament”, “the presence of state-controlled media” and an “entrenched Soviet Nomenklatura” (Cornell, 2002). Even more so, these institutions had been endowed with a “constitutional base” and a “certain sense of legitimacy” with actors developing “tools to propagandize [their] policy among the population” (Ibid). Yet the emergence of these institutions has been discussed primarily in the field of conflictology and how they have served a radical nationalist agenda born out of various conflicts in the face of Georgian oppression.³⁵

It would appear that Abkhazia’s autonomy played a crucial role in that it provided leaders with “an excellent and ready-made power base” (Cornell, 2002) that encompassed “decision-making bodies, links to outside support and to financial resources”, and also “media outlets for propagating the message to the people” (Ibid). Although research is more limited for South Ossetia, some previous conclusions appear to have been hasty. Admittedly, its degree of autonomy during the Soviet period was lower and thus its potential for statehood limited – with an initial project that was somewhat indecisive³⁶ – yet it cannot be denied that the political institutions which were created later served its nationalism and emancipation-from-Georgia political agenda. Despite being granted different legal statuses under the USSR, Abkhazia and South Ossetia both experienced more or less significant patronage and clientelism relations with Moscow, which may help to explain why the two de facto states today share more or less similar characteristics in their political lives. This third discussion thus hypothesises that the level of democratisation is influenced by the level of political autonomy granted during the Soviet period.

³⁵ For instance, Arsène Saparov (2010) examined the emergence of South Ossetian autonomy as a tool developed by the Bolsheviks to ease tensions with the Georgian authorities after the start of the Sovietisation in 1921.

³⁶ South Ossetia originally wanted to be incorporated into Russia, but faced with a number of difficulties, including a lack of control over the proclaimed territories, it revised its request and asked to be granted autonomous status (Saparov, 2010).

H4 - Nationalism and democratisation

The fourth hypothesis is perhaps the most widely discussed in the literature on domestic politics in de facto states - the relationship between nationalism and democratisation (Tansey, 2007; Clogg, 2008; Trier & al, 2010; Caspersen, 2011; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008; 2012; 2013). The interviewees discussed the ethnocentric nature of Abkhaz nationalism and how it proved to be a catalyst for democratisation, nurtured during the Soviet period of ethnic repression and brought into full view during independence with a state structure designed to serve the ethnic Abkhaz. Again, data for South Ossetia is sparse and respondents offered very few opinions. Nevertheless, South Ossetia has developed a nationalism in which the ethnic factor is less important than in Abkhazia, where there are still important links with Georgia proper, two arguments which may contribute to the façade of democratisation.

The Soviet period is central to Abkhazia in that it witnessed the emergence of the first arguments supporting the concept of an “ethno-genesis” (Researcher n°1). In a highly hierarchical system, “to demonstrate the standing of your ethnicity” (Ibid) was used as a demarcation instrument to prove that “you are (...) of national greatness” (Ibid) which led to a “paradoxical return to the nationalist discourses picking up where the national awakers of the 19th and early 20th century left off” (Ibid). In the case of Abkhazia, the Georgianisation policy, dating from the death of Lakoba to that of Stalin, provided the territory with its “national myths”, and “a sense of national identity” (Ibid), reinforced by the degree of autonomy granted and the idea of *laissez faire*, “do what you want, keep it in your republic” (Ibid). Quite quickly, the Abkhaz and South Ossetian state projects formed in opposition to the Georgian state, portrayed “as an enemy” (International expert n°2) which remains “a key part of their narrative today” (Researcher n°1). The Abkhazian ethos was “built on the idea that the main enemy all over the world is Georgia” (International expert n°2), and left the Abkhaz no choice but to build a “strong society” (Researcher n°7), otherwise they “could not survive” (Ibid). Rapidly, and encouraged by the emergence of political institutions during the Soviet period, an ethno-nationalist project took root amongst Abkhaz with political institutions designed to provide security for the ethnic Abkhaz and prevent them from becoming a minority once again. This nationalism has had a direct impact on the democratisation of Abkhazia, albeit in two different ways. Firstly, this project fostered a democratic impetus insofar as the “ultimate goal of secession is to build a democratic society which would respect civil rights” (International expert n°2) to avoid replicating the discrimination perpetrated by the oppressor state. As such, “there is no sense for building an authoritarian Abkhazia” (Ibid). Interviewees highlighted these differences between Georgia and Abkhazia and the need not only to separate territorially and legally, but also

ideologically and politically. To adopt the Georgian political model is to affirm that “they would be basically the same” (Ibid), which the Abkhaz refused. What Laurence Broers theorised as “competitive democratisation” (2005) vis-à-vis the parent state seems to have worked for Abkhazia for a time. They “were trying to portray them as more democratic than Georgia” (Researcher n°7), particularly in the context of the “democracy-for-recognition” strategy following the recognition of Kosovo. Furthermore, the need to cooperate with each other, notably with ethnic Armenians and Russians within Abkhazia so as to oppose the “enemy” led to “some sort of democracy” with heavy cooperation within the society (Researcher n°7). Nevertheless, the growing ethno-nationalism is incompatible with the notion of democratic fairness. Indeed, Abkhazia seems to exemplify such friction “between the ‘ethnos’ of self-determination and the ‘demos’ of democracy” (Popescu, 2006; Caspersen 2011). First and foremost, this “deep insecurity” (Researcher n°6) makes it hard “to relax [these] laws” (Ibid) favouring the ethnic Abkhaz in politics up to the consolidation of an “apartheid regime” (Researcher n°4). Secondly, the idea of a “common enemy” allows a number of undemocratic practices to be disregarded. One interviewee explained that today it is common to hear in de facto states, “we have [an] enemy, we must consolidate against this enemy, it is not time to work and speak about the corruption” (International expert n°2).

In South Ossetia, the lower population displacements during the secession wars and a relatively porous border with Georgia have led to a low level of ethnic tension (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012; Dembińska 2023). During the Soviet period, around half of Georgians and South Ossetians were linked by mixed marriages (Toal, 2008) and the borderisation process developed by the Russian forces was put in place “not so much to protect South Ossetians from Georgians but also to protect (...) people living in South Ossetia to cross south to Georgia” (International expert n°3), so the “links are still very strong” (Ibid). South Ossetia is quite ethnically homogenous, yet given its close relationship with Georgia, the closure of the Ergneti market in 2004 reignited hostilities and was seen as Georgia's third genocidal campaign against the South Ossetian population (Toal & O’Loughlin, 2013). This was considered by the South Ossetian authorities as a new manifestation of the Georgianisation policy under Saakashvili’s presidency (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008). The population rallied around this discourse, now remembering “Soviet years (...) with nostalgia” and “as an efficient counterbalance to Georgian nationalism” (O’Loughlin & Kolosov, 2017), as illustrated on April 27, 2020, when President Bibilov gave the capital of the Republic the second name of “Stalinir” (PEC, 2020).

Whilst Moore asserted that “nationalism is in fact a necessary condition for democracy” (Moore, 2001 quoted in Caspersen, 2011) in the case of Abkhazia, it would appear that the nationalist project has provided an undeniably democratic impulse. Nevertheless, today, its ethnic character is one of the greatest obstacles to its full democratisation with a whole segment of its population barred from entering the political arena. As for South Ossetia, it would be wrong not to recognise a national sentiment, particularly around the discourse of “victimisation” and rejection of the “genocidal” Georgian state (Hoch, 2020). The South Ossetian case seems to call into question Dahl's theory (1971) that a cultural homogeneity “may facilitate the introduction and consolidation of democracy” (Dahl, 1971 quoted in Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012). On the other hand, although Abkhazia has an exclusionary regime, its desire to preserve its titular nation has pushed it towards a model of inclusion which, although limited, can offer part of its population a democratic political structure reinforced by the need for domestic cooperation in the face of the enemy, confirming Arend Lijphart's theory that democracy can flourish in multicultural environments (Lijphart, 1977). For these two de facto states, the ethnic component, more than nationalism itself, seems to be the crucial element of differentiation. This fourth discussion thus hypothesises that ethnically heterogeneous de facto states are more likely to display democratic features.

H5 - Patron state interference

In 2014, the movie "Domino effect" tells the story of Rafael, the Abkhaz Minister of Sport in charge of organising an international chess competition, and his partner, the Russian opera singer Natasha. Under the cover of this sporting event, the viewers discover the difficult, if not impossible, integration of Natasha who reminds audiences how much dependence on Russia is experienced "for lack of a better way" with a population that only yearns for independence.³⁷ South Ossetia, on the other hand, has been portrayed as being entirely reliant on Russia, only increased by its various efforts to be incorporated into it. The dependence of de facto states on their parent state has been addressed at length in the literature (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012; Ambrosio & Lange, 2016; Gerrits & Bader, 2016; German, 2016; Kolstø, 2020), yet less attention has been paid to Russian interference in the political life of de facto states.

In the case of Abkhazia, the interviewees first described the characteristics of the dependency on the patron state. Despite the “need to have very deep relations” with Russia since there is “no other” force to guarantee economic and military security, Abkhaz have some leeway to choose “how close to Russia [they] want to be” (Researcher n°4). There is this idea that Russia is the “best hope” but

³⁷ Domino Effect (2014) directed by Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosołowski.

under no circumstances would the Abkhaz take the risk of being “subsumed by them (...)” (Researcher n°1). Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to speak of anti-Russian sentiment, simply because you “cannot be anti-Russian” (Researcher n°7). In this respect, “because all of the candidates are pro-Russia”, “they [the Russian authorities] are not interfering directly into the elections” (Ibid). The Russian authorities “knew that [the candidates] would be sympathetic towards Russia” (Researcher n°6) and for this reason “how they elected their president did not (...) concern the Kremlin” (Ibid). Furthermore, “neither Moscow, let alone Tbilisi, has any influence on the parliamentary elections” (International expert n°8), seeing them as “too insignificant” (Ibid). Thus, the general argument is that “Russia doesn’t interfere in everyday political business” but it does “the maintenance” (Researcher n°4). During election periods, the Russian authorities provided “marketing packagings” (Ibid) to support “the more Russian politicians with these *политехнологии*” (Ibid). Furthermore, since “Russia is (...) a dictatorship”, the Abkhaz “are not going to impress Russia with their democratic potential, how competitive their elections are” (Researcher n°6).

In the case of South Ossetia, the interference has been so great that the territory was described as a “puppet state” with a “puppet government” (Researcher n°4). Russian “elites (...) are largely dominating life in South Ossetia” (Researcher n°3). For a range of reasons, South Ossetia has been exposed to much greater political interference. Firstly, because of its strategic geographical location that could “lead to big troubles for Georgia and for the whole region, by closing important roads, by closing or disturbing energy connections” (Ibid) the Russian authorities wanted to keep it as a means of leverage over Tbilisi. Moreover, this total economic dependence on Russian authorities has subjected the territory to demonstrate its loyalty, sometimes as the result of threats: “you will lose your job if you vote against this guy” (International expert n°2), while “reduc[ing] the real decision-making capacity of local politicians” (Hoch, 2020). Finally, the historically strong links between South Ossetia and Georgia have made Moscow more vigilant. In order “to keep this strategic location also loyal”, “you better not allow them to see the benefit of cooperating” with Georgia proper (Researcher n°3). Therefore, in South Ossetia, there is a rather peculiar situation of “politics without politics” (International expert n°2), with de facto authorities who “are sitting and waiting for instructions from Moscow” (Ibid).

In the case of South Ossetia, the literature has so far concentrated on the question of statehood, which is still under discussion. South Ossetia remains dependent on Russia “to provide the basic functions of a state” (German, 2016), with a set of laws “often identical to the original Russian legislation” (Gerrits & Bader, 2016). In the case of Abkhazia, the entity has often stood out for its

opposition to Russia's legal interference, with important resistance to the passing of certain laws,³⁸ despite a strong dependency. However, with regard to elections, the researchers agree that “the role of the patron state may not be as influential as expected” (Ó Beacháin, 2015). On several occasions, candidates endorsed by the patron state were rejected and lost the elections, as was the case in Abkhazia in 2004 when Russian backed-up candidate Kajimba lost the elections ([Civil.ge, 2004](#)) or in 2017 in South Ossetia when the Kremlin-endorsed Tibilov lost the elections. Yet several episodes have also confirmed the Kremlin's role in the conduct of elections. In 2011, when South Ossetian society voted for Alla Dzhioyeva, the Supreme Court cancelled the results and the new elections in 2012 gave victory to the Kremlin-backed Leonid Tibilov. In 2004, not satisfied with the results in Abkhazia, Moscow "stopped imports of agricultural products from Abkhazia” (Komakhia, 2017). Baghapsh stated that he would not give ground as a response to Russian pressure (Ibid). A reaction that is rather characteristic of Abkhazia, whereas South Ossetia is more prone to bowing out.

Although “Russia does not loom large in everyday politics” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is “a very powerful behind-the-scenes actor” (de Waal, 2020). Regarding South Ossetia, the interference is greater in that its very political structure mimics that of Moscow, completely undermining the independence of its domestic politics. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the importance of civil society, which has on several occasions voiced a wish different from that of the Kremlin. In Abkhazia, despite a general pro-Russian sentiment nurtured by dependence, civil society has resisted attempts at authoritarian intrusions into both the legislative field and the holding of elections. However, the fairness of the elections has been severely tested for both de facto states, as Moscow has more than once altered the election results. This fifth discussion thus hypothesises that the more the de facto state depends on the autocratic patron state, the less likely it is to democratise.

H6 - International aid and civil society

The sixth hypothesis has been the least addressed to date in the field of de facto states. Already, in their opposition to a minimalist definition of democracy, theorists recognised on numerous occasions that civil society was now a component of the so-called democratic political system. Popescu (2006), wondering why some de facto states were more democratic than others, put forward a number of arguments, including the fact that international support in some cases encouraged the emergence of a civil society. The issue of civil society has been discussed in the literature on de facto states (Popescu, 2006; 2007; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012, Kopeček & Hoch, 2016; Kopeček & al, 2017; de Waal 2020, Hoch, 2020), however, limited research has been carried

³⁸ On the passage of the law on foreign agents see : [Mamuka Komakhia, 2023](#) and on the question on land sale [Izzet Yalin Yüksel, 2022](#).

out regarding the specific nature of the international aid received on the emergence of civil society and, by extension, the practice of democracy.

After the violent secession conflicts of the 1990s, a number of international organisations intervened in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, initially to deliver humanitarian aid and act as mediators between them and Georgia, before gradually encouraging local players to advocate domestic reforms. Regarding Abkhazia, a United Nations office for the protection and promotion of human rights in Abkhazia was created on 10 December 1996 ([UNOMIG](#)). The UN “work[ed] hard in Abkhazia to build civil society (International expert n°2) and to “support individuals who want to be independent” (Ibid). In addition, “there is a certain openness in Sukhum/i towards international organisations (...) which you could not see in South Ossetia” (International expert n°3). The “humanitarian incentive was important as well” since it “helped to build up [a] strong and viable civil society” (Researcher n°7). The Abkhaz case study is very much embedded in the "linkage to the West" mechanism developed by Levitsky and Way (2010), which fostered democratisation in the aftermath of the Cold War.

By contrast, in South Ossetia, the "main focus of international organisations (...) at that time was the reconstruction (...), not building independent civil society” (International expert n°2). Established in December 1992, the OSCE Mission to Georgia was mainly created to secure the region, with assistance stretching from political reforms to conflict resolution to border management. This difference was accounted for by the fact that “[at] that time everybody [thought] that problems between Georgians and South Ossetians can be solved very easily through the economics and maybe through this people to people contact” (Ibid). As previously demonstrated, socio-economic links between Georgia and the South Ossetian region had always been very strong due to the mixed families up until the closure of the Ergneti market, described by one interviewee as a “big mistake” (International expert n°2). Whilst this development has enabled the emergence of “some (...) independent organisations (...) who are influential and who are more or less independent from government”, “after 2008, [the] situation changed” (International expert n°2) drastically. Russia's recognition has been accompanied by a hardening of relations with civil society and NGOs. The OSCE is still active and, paradoxically, well regarded, because of the fact that “Russia is a member of the OSCE” and “this is for sure (...) one of the reasons why [the OSCE] ha[s] been more acceptable” (International expert n°3).

Abkhazia's civil society has been developed in three stages: the formation of its civil society (1992 to 1995), involvement in political dialogue (1996-2007) and, since 2008, a greater focus on domestic policies (Kopeček & al, 2017). In 2005, when Bagapsh was elected president, Abkhazia

experienced an important episode of democratisation with a president who supported the sustainability of civil society and political pluralism (Ibid). The democratisation-for-recognition strategy has also been a significant impetus for democratisation, with substantial investment from the United States and the European Union. Indeed, “between 1997 and 2006, the EU committed some €25 million for projects in Abkhazia” (Popescu, 2007) and in 2008, no fewer than 200 NGOs were operating in the de facto’s territory. The European Union put a strong emphasis on “supporting local NGOs, improving healthcare and education” (de Waal, 2020). Unlike Abkhazia, South Ossetia is “the least developed region in terms of civil society” (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008). In South Ossetia, from 1997 to 2006, the EU allocated €8 million, almost three times less than in Abkhazia (Popescu, 2007). Firstly, the EU has shown much less interest in civil society development aid projects, favouring sectors such as road engineering, finances, banking, agriculture... As a result “civil society is (...) less developed” (Ibid). Secondly, the political projects involved collaboration with Georgian society, which was occasionally deemed harsh and counter-productive.

The international aid received since the mid-1990s has enabled the emergence of a civil society conducive to democratisation, which is currently under severe pressure. With hopes of reintegrating South Ossetia into Georgia proper, the international organisations have concentrated on rebuilding infrastructure rather than civil society which, being weak, has not been able to offer local political resistance to Russian autocratic diffusion. Furthermore, South Ossetia passed the law “On Non-Profit Organisations” in 2014, and severely restricted access to its territory. In Abkhazia, substantial aid received after the periods of violence helped give life to a vigorous civil society. Nevertheless, the double standards of the EU and the United States have gradually eroded the link between government and civil society. The “Abkhazian political discourse places far less emphasis on the democratic nature of the country’s public administration than it used to do several years ago” (Kopeček, 2016), and Russian influence heightened with the Russian authorities “helping (...) with reforms and with the implementation of legislation” (Kopeček & al, 2017). Despite fierce resistance, anti-NGO rhetoric is becoming increasingly severe, culminating in a recent statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Inal Ardzinba, who, when visiting Moscow, called for very close monitoring of NGO activity to avoid “any radicalization” ([Abkhaz World, 2023](#)). This seems to have correlated with a slowdown in democratisation and confirmation of the hybrid aspect of the regime since 2014. This sixth discussion thus hypothesises a correlation between the type of international aid received in the post-conflict period and the degree of independence of civil society.

H7 - Independence aspirations

The declarations of independence by Abkhazia and South Ossetia were fostered by a period of political liberalisation made possible by the glasnost policy launched by Gorbachev in 1986 during which people “could express themselves quite openly and this is the main source from which they learn about democracy”(Researcher n°4). This independence led to the emergence of a more or less solid statehood and the first signs of a political regime seeking international legal recognition. The relationship between independence and democracy has been discussed in the literature, (Broers, 2005; Popescu, 2006; Caspersen, 2008; 2011; Protsyk, 2009; Voller, 2015; Kopeček, 2017), and firstly underlined a paradigm shift adopted after the recognition of the de facto state of Kosovo in 2008.³⁹ Nevertheless, it would appear that the relationship with democracy cannot be dealt with solely through the prism of the quest for recognition. As such, how is it to be explained that, despite realising it would not be recognised internationally in the near future, Abkhazia has continued to democratise? Meanwhile, despite several referendums to unite with Russia, South Ossetia faces a more complex reality, sometimes almost paradoxical, claiming its desire to be part of Russia but fervently defending its independence.

Abkhazia's desire for independence is intrinsic to its vision of statehood, and this issue can in no way be the subject of debate, making it part of the “single issue regimes” (Kopeček, 2017). Whilst Abkhazia has fully embraced the so-called “democratisation-for-recognition” strategy, its thwarted hopes as the EU and the US reaffirmed their support for Georgian sovereignty have made it “switch from this focus on international recognition (...) towards internal politics” (Researcher n°4). Once the Abkhaz authorities understood that their request for recognition by the West was “nonsense”, they “turned this energy into the internal democratisation” which became “a goal per se” (Ibid). They wanted “to get rid of the oppressive rulers” and to do so they had to build a “democratic society” (Ibid). Although Abkhazia realised that it would not enjoy the same favours as Kosovo, the “learning” (Ibid) that it received throughout this period of democratisation has benefited it greatly. This argument provides a justification for the genuine aspect of Abkhaz democratisation, with the authorities claiming that “we are just doing it for ourselves because it matters to us” (Researcher n°6), calling into question the argument that democratisation is “very much about seeking acknowledgement from the rest of the world” (International expert n°3). Furthermore, for the electorate, “the fact that nobody or very few people outside of Abkhazia recognise (...) elections, doesn't really matter”, they expect the de facto state to “deliver those things like education and (...)

³⁹ Demand for recognition of independence was no longer justified by the legitimate right of peoples to self-determination, but because they had embraced a democratic way of operating that satisfied a set of values promoted by the Western powers, which was called the “democratisation-for-recognition” strategy.

TV service, (...) electricity, taxes...” (Ibid). Moreover, Abkhazia has always formally opposed the idea of ever being attached to Russia, encouraging it to develop “some resilience against Russian influence” and by extension “incentives of civil society”, of “freedom”, making it “more democratic than South Ossetia” (Researcher n°7). In addition, “historical connotations” (Ibid) are of significance with Abkhaz people claiming that they are from “the Ancient Greek civilisation, the European civilisation”, and from there flourished a natural “love for democracy and this idea” (Ibid). For South Ossetia, the picture is radically contrasting: there are “not strong aspirations to build an independent country” (International expert n°2). South Ossetia has on several occasions expressed its wish to be attached to North Ossetia by means of referendums, however such calls have always been rejected by Moscow. For the Kremlin, this is an “influential instrument against Georgia” (International expert n°3). Consequently, Russia is keeping South Ossetia in this in-between position, nurturing hopes of a possible territorial integration that seems unrealistic (International expert n°2). Therefore, South Ossetia has not developed any resilience towards Russian pressure (Researcher n°7) and, by extension, there is “no possibility for civil society to open freely their ideas”, with an entity that became “the worst form of [the] Russian Federation” (Ibid). In both cases, however, it would seem necessary to qualify the importance of recognition in the political approach adopted. Firstly, Abkhazia has slowed down its democratisation since 2014 and the anti-NGO discourse has become increasingly forceful, as has suspicion of the Western powers. At the same time, in South Ossetia, despite its total dependence on Russia, the desire to become part of that country came to a halt last year, with President Gagloev cancelling the referendum initially planned by his predecessor Bibilov for 17 July 2022 ([Open Caucasus media, 2022](#)). Furthermore, as demonstrated in H6, civil society has more than once shown its ability to oppose Kremlin-backed candidates, dismissing the sometimes over-generalised rhetoric on Russo-South Ossetian relations and its desire to be associated with it as a reflection of political alignment.

This last hypothesis is fundamental in that it has enabled a better understanding of the terms “genuine” in the case of Abkhazia and “façade” in the case of South Ossetia. In Abkhazia, despite the realisation that it would not be recognised, the de facto territory has continued to develop democratically and to secure several of its institutions by holding regular elections which are internationally deemed as competitive. The drive to move towards a democratic system has thus become an endogenous, authentic objective. South Ossetia's quest for independence opens up a fascinating discussion on the nature of the democratic “façade” of its regime. It is characterised by authoritarian rule camouflaged behind a set of institutions that look democratic, with regular elections monitored by regulatory bodies and the presence of “observers” to judge the degree of fairness and freedom of the elections. The question that arises here lies in the reasons for

maintaining this façade when autocratic Russia has no interest in democracy. Hasn't its geographical condition and economic ultra-dependence made it more vulnerable than ever to Russia's autocratic influence and deprived the region of the opportunity to learn about democracy, making this façade "the best they can do"? The annulment of the last referendum, presence of voices against union with Russia,⁴⁰ evidence of a generally weak civil society that has nevertheless demonstrated its opposition to the Kremlin in several elections, and the reasons behind the demand to be attached to Russia "due to its almost complete economic dependence on Russian aid" (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2013) and "as a significant guarantee that in the future Russia will not refuse to protect South Ossetia" (Hoch, 2020), seems to be working in this direction. There is still too much of a tendency in the literature to discuss de facto states in terms of their transition to democracy, and thus to talk of "failure to democratize" (Voller, 2015) for example in the case of South Ossetia, where the presence of a façade calls for further research. This seventh discussion thus hypothesises that the desire for independence from the patron state is conducive to democratisation.

⁴⁰ Examples of people speaking out against the regime: Alan Parastaev, Viliam Dzagoev, and Mira Tskhovrebova.

Conclusion

General remarks

This heuristic research, conducted through a comparative study, put forward seven hypotheses for gaining a better understanding of the domestic political life of the de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Abkhazia has developed a number of institutionalised democratic elements whereas South Ossetia appears only to have put on a democratic façade. The eight interviews conducted for this research highlighted and confirmed what Schedler (2002) called "the chain of democratic choice". No one criterion that favours or reduces the chances of democracy should be considered in isolation as they in fact complement and support one another.

Firstly, this research demonstrated that "election outcomes are not consistently related to democracy" (Bogaards, 2007). Nowadays elections are widely held – even in non democratic regimes often merely as a means to identify the opposition so as to better quell it. As regards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, this research highlighted the significance of criteria such as civil society and the patron state's interference in the process of political regime labelling. The three-stage methodology adopted before, during and after elections (Elklit & Svensson, 1997) helped illuminate different democratic infringements when the election outcomes were presented as free, fair and in accordance with the law by the de facto leaders. Whilst Abkhazia has been widely labeled as an ethnocracy, a segment of its population remains barred from entering the political arena based on ethnic discriminations, it is far from being the only obstacle to democracy. Fraud, vote buying and excessive use of administrative resources by the ruling party each distorted the fairness of the elections. In South Ossetia, access to the political arena is subject to authoritarian control, albeit with seemingly democratic structures, which, instrumentalised by the ruling party, exercised an arbitrary selection of candidates allowed to compete. Furthermore, this three-step dissection demonstrated that when elections are deemed competitive, vote buying attempts and voting day frauds are more prevalent since the ballot represents a real risk for the candidates. On the contrary, when control is exercised prior to voting day, vote-buying and electoral fraud are reduced in favour of arbitrary application of the law, since the ballot poses no real danger to the ruling party, which has eliminated the competition upstream.

This research also proved the problem of the transition paradigm, which rejects the idea that a regime can be anything other than a liberal democracy or an autocracy. Abkhazia exhibits features of a hybrid regime and as such is not a democracy. It has admittedly democratised, in particular between 2008 and 2009, but this study on its most recent parliamentary election has shown that Abkhazia embraced the characteristics of a competitive authoritarian regime. The label "ethnocracy" has been called into question as it ignores a number of breaches of democratic norms and has too often led to hasty conclusions. Simultaneously, this study aimed to prompt a reconsideration of the case of South Ossetia and its democratic façade. Its authoritarian credentials have often been attributed to its pro-Russian elites, Russian interference in elections, and the desire to be attached to its authoritarian patron state. Nevertheless, its civil society, which is admittedly weak but has opposed the pro-Kremlin candidates on several occasions; its opposition, which is muzzled but present; and the mainly economic and security motivations behind the desire to attach itself to North Ossetia, call into question the nature of this facade. Therefore, although elections in and of themselves are not enough to label a regime, they are essential in that they enable certain essential aspects to be thoroughly investigated.

The seven hypothesis

To help elucidate these questions, and in particular to explain the political divergence in these two de facto states, the seven hypothesis developed in the last chapter offer a strong foundation. Whilst South Ossetia is isolated, making it more susceptible to Russian autocratic forces with no demographic forces to make politics; Abkhazia's coastal position and sub-tropical climate have rendered it a privileged region (H1). These geographical features enabled it to receive major investment during the Soviet period, when it was a prime destination for the Muscovite Nomenklatura. At the same time, South Ossetia has suffered from a significant lack of resources and the small size of its territory has multiplied the effects of the destruction caused by the war, fertilising an informal economy (H2) that remains beyond any control. During the Soviet period, South Ossetia remained in the bosom of Tbilisi with its status as an autonomous oblast which, although allowing for the emergence of political structures such as a parliament, limited its experience of political autonomy. Concomitantly, Abkhazia, which had been granted the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic in its early days, nurtured the foundations of a statehood with its first constitution in 1925. Yet, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have inherited a way of doing politics that is specific to the Soviet period, with personalised patron-client relations, façade parties and the importance of loyalty and clans, which are now essential elements of their political life (H3). Furthermore, the Soviet period also fuelled strong nationalisms with the policy of "Georgianisation"

instigated by Stalin and then Beria up until 1953. Georgianisation materialised in Abkhazia with the rise of a political project favouring the Abkhaz ethnic group and unfair to the ethnic Georgians of the Gal/i region whose access to political life remains curtailed. In South Ossetia, although a nationalism exists, its ethnic component is lower and has not given rise to an exclusionist and unjust policy (H4). Isolated, without resources and eager to emancipate itself from a genocidal state, South Ossetia is now almost entirely dependent on Russia for its survival. Its economy and security are guaranteed by Moscow, as is part of its politics, with elites trained in Moscow and a party and legislative system which are mere pale copies of its patron state. Abkhazia, on the other hand, has an assertive political project and a desire for independence that enjoys broad social consensus. As such, it views the Moscow option more as "for want of anything better", and adopting the authoritarian Russian or oppressive Georgian regime would not make any sense when its aim is to protect those who have been oppressed (H5). This longing for independence is particularly driven by a civil society that was fostered in the post-war years by substantial investment from the United Nations and the European Union. Conversely, because of its strong social and historical links with Georgia, South Ossetia instead received economic aid to rebuild its infrastructure, with fewer projects to develop its civil society when the authorities thought the territory would be reintegrated quickly. Given that the presence of a free civil society is one of the essential elements of democracy today, the extent and nature of the international aid received after the war is an important criterion in assessing the overall state of democratic development (H6). Lastly, the final hypothesis (H7) highlighted how the independence project could play a role in the practice of more or less democratic power. As mentioned above, it has been demonstrated that Abkhazia's desire for independence enabled it to escape to an extent from Russian autocratic diffusion and, for a time, to open up to the West during the democratisation-for-recognition era. At the same time, South Ossetia's extreme economic dependence has rendered it powerless, and being attached to Russia means being able to provide its population with a more robust economy and security guarantees. Thus, H7 opened the discussion on the democratic façade of South Ossetia. Several interviewees often recalled that for the people, the political regime counted for little when they could not afford to meet their basic needs. As a result, during campaign periods, candidates often promise to provide food or reparations in exchange for votes. In South Ossetia, is this façade evidence of an entrenched authoritarian regime in disguise or, on the contrary, a subtle form of democracy drowned in dependence, isolation and practices inherited from the Soviet period?

Further research

Labelling political regimes is a complicated and demanding exercise, and cannot be reduced to hasty conclusions. Today, the literature on de facto states is subject to major methodological obstacles when access to these territories is often restricted. Nevertheless, without in-depth research and a rigorous application of the definition of democracy (i.e. not a minimalist one) the results will be all too shaky, and, on a larger scale will do a disservice to the de facto authorities whose shaping of a domestic political life can be a guarantee of survival. This leads to consideration of the question of a new typology of political regimes in de facto states. The latter are in fact subject to criteria that are not referenced in current theory: interference by a patron state, fear of a parent state or non-recognition. Their particular situation makes them subject to constant change, when Abkhazia has shown signs of democratic regression since 2014 and Gagloyev's rejection of the referendum to join Russia calls for close monitoring.

Appendices

Appendix I. “Table 1.1. Some Requirements for a Democracy among a Large Number of People”.
Source: Dahl, Robert Alan. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. Yale University Press, (1971).

**Table 1.1. Some Requirements for a Democracy
among a Large Number of People**

| For the opportunity to: | The following institutional guarantees are required: |
|--|--|
| I. Formulate preferences | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Freedom to form and join organizations2. Freedom of expression3. Right to vote4. Right of political leaders to compete for support5. Alternative sources of information |
| II. Signify preferences | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Freedom to form and join organizations2. Freedom of expression3. Right to vote4. Eligibility for public office5. Right of political leaders to compete for support6. Alternative sources of information7. Free and fair elections |
| III. Have preferences weighted equally in conduct of government | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Freedom to form and join organizations2. Freedom of expression3. Right to vote4. Eligibility for public office5. Right of political leaders to compete for support<ol style="list-style-type: none">5a. Right of political leaders to compete for votes6. Alternative sources of information7. Free and fair elections8. Institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference |

Appendix II. “Table 1 - Checklist for Election Assessment”. Source: Elklit, Jørgen, and Palle Svensson. ‘What Makes Elections Free and Fair?’ *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 3 (1997): 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1997.0041>.

Table 1 — Checklist for Election Assessment

| Time Period | Dimension | |
|--------------------|--|---|
| | “Free” | “Fair” |
| Before polling day | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freedom of movement Freedom of speech (for candidates, the media, voters, and others) Freedom of assembly Freedom of association Freedom from fear in connection with the election and the electoral campaign Absence of impediments to standing for election (for both political parties and independent candidates) Equal and universal suffrage | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A transparent electoral process An election act and an electoral system that grant no special privileges to any political party or social group Absence of impediments to inclusion in the electoral register Establishment of an independent and impartial election commission Impartial treatment of candidates by the police, the army, and the courts of law Equal opportunities for political parties and independent candidates to stand for election Impartial voter-education programs An orderly election campaign (observance of a code of conduct) Equal access to publicly controlled media Impartial allotment of public funds to political parties (if relevant) No misuse of government facilities for campaign purposes |
| On polling day | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity to participate in the election | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to all polling stations for representatives of the political parties, accredited local and international election observers, and the media Secrecy of the ballot Absence of intimidation of voters Effective design of ballot papers Proper ballot boxes Impartial assistance to voters (if necessary) Proper counting procedures Proper treatment of void ballot papers Proper precautionary measures when transporting election materials Impartial protection of polling stations |
| After polling day | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal possibilities of complaint | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official and expeditious announcement of election results Impartial treatment of any election complaints Impartial reports on the election results by the media Acceptance of the election results by everyone involved |

Appendix III. Political parties competing in the South Ossetian parliamentary elections (2019)

United Ossetia (Единая Осетия)



The United Ossetia party was officially established on 5 September 2012 following the election of Anatol Bibilov as chairman ([Кавказский узел, 2012](#)). The party promotes a threefold programme, “Unity, order and development will be the basis of Ossetian unity!”. It insists on post-war socio-economic development, national order, hunting down corrupt officials on South-Ossetian and Russian territory, and international recognition including, "joining the UN and other international organisations” ([Единая Осетия](#)). In his inaugural speech, Bibilov said he wanted “the unification of South and North Ossetia into one republic within Russia” to become the central ideological axis of the party (Ibid). The party slogan, “Two countries - One Ossetia” (“Две страны - одна Осетия”) expresses the will to create a multi-ethnic Russian state (“многонационального российского государства”, Ibid)⁴¹. In 2014, the party obtained 43.19% of parliamentary votes ([Парламент Республики Южная Осетия](#)). In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the party was led by Minister of Emergency Situations Alan Tادтаев ([ТАСС, 2019](#)). The campaign was mainly organised around the themes of “tighter integration with Russia, government effectiveness, economy and direct benefits to residents (house repairs, foodstuffs and the like)” ([Civil.ge, 2019](#)). The party presented a Republican list of 18 candidates and the latter was the first to be registered by the CEC, on 25 April 2019, the date on which it was able to start the pre-election campaign ([ПЕС, 2019](#)).

⁴¹ What may seem paradoxical at first glance, joining international organisations and being attached to Russia, reveals a complex reality in South Ossetia, where the desire for independence is strong but is overtaken by a disastrous economic situation coupled with a high level of insecurity, which are among the arguments for being attached to North Ossetia (see Hoch, 2020).

Ныкхас (Ныхас)



Created in 2013, the Nykhas Party is led by Foreign Minister David Sanakoev. In 2014, Nykhas garnered 7.47% of votes ([Парламент Республики Южная Осетия](#)). In 2019, in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, Sanakoev decided to dissolve the party he led, “New Ossetia”, and joined forces with Nykhas along with the “Alan Union” led by Alan Gagloev ([АЛАНИЯинфор,2019](#)). The Nykhas- New Ossetia alliance had also been endorsed by Alan Gagloev, who obtained 10.1% in the 2017 presidential election ([Civil Georgia, 2019](#)). It is now the party of the current president, Alan Gagloev. In 2019, the party was the main opposition force against the United Ossetia ruling party ([ТАСС , 2019](#)). With regards to unification with Russia, Nykhas distinguished itself from United Ossetia with the suspension on 30 May 2022 of the referendum planned by former president Bibilov. The Republican list of 5 candidates and the 11 candidates on the list for single-mandate constituencies were both registered by the CEC on 18 May 2019 ([ПЕС, 2019](#)).

Unity of the People (Социалистическая партия Единство народа)



On 22 April 2013, the founding congress of the Unity of the People’s party was held. Vladimir Kelekhsaev was unanimously elected chairman. Then head of the administration of the Dzau district, he justified the creation of this “republican political party” to strengthen “participation of citizens of the Republic of South Ossetia in the political life of society” ([ПЕС, 2013](#)). Among the flagship areas highlighted were youth, health, education and access to housing (Ibid). In the 2014 elections, the party obtained 13.24% of votes ([Парламент Республики Южная Осетия](#)). In the 2019 elections the Unity of People party was led by Kelekhsaev. On 26 April 2019, the CEC received notifications from both the national lists and self- nominated candidates, allowing them to open a "Joint Stock Savings Bank of the Republic of South Ossetia" account and start collecting signatures ([ПЕСС, 2019](#)). The Republican list of 13 candidates was accepted by the CEC on 15

May 2019 ([ПЕСС, 2019](#)) and the list for single-mandate constituencies on 17 May 2019, also consisting of 13 candidates.

People's Party
(Народная партия РЮО)



The People's Party was established in 2003 during the presidency of Eduard Kokoity. During his rule, it was pro-presidential; in recent years, it has lacked an independent political agenda and has entered into alliances with other parties. In 2014, the party obtained 9.09% of votes ([Парламент Республики Южная Осетия](#)). During the 2019 elections, the People's Party was led by Alexander Pliyev ([ТАСС, 2019](#)). The party received support from former South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity, whose return to South Ossetia from Russia during the elections caused intense reactions ([Civil.ge, 2019](#)). The party has a relatively socialist-liberal political ideology, reinforced by an agreement signed in 2010 with the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus ([ПЕС, 2010](#)). The original party programme stated that “a sustainable democracy is necessary for South Ossetia as a prerequisite for dynamic development in the 21st century”, as well as a necessary step to “promote the development of civil society and independent political parties” ([Народная партия Республики Южная Осетия](#)). In 2019, the party submitted a Republican list of 14 candidates ([ПЕС, 2019](#)), accepted on 15 May 2019, and a list for single-mandate constituencies of which 13 candidates were accepted on 17 May 2019 ([ПЕС, 2019](#)).

Unity
(ЕДИНСТВО)



The Unity party was created in 2003, and served as the ruling party from 2004 until 2011, when its presidential candidate, Anatoly Bibilov, lost the race that brought oppositionist Leonid Tibilov to power after a series of protests ([Civil Georgia, 2019](#)). The party was largely modelled on the ruling Russian party with which it signed an agreement in 2008 entitled “On inter-party cooperation between the party "United Russia" and the South Ossetian party “Unity" ([Эксперт, 2008](#)). In 2014, the party failed to reach the 7% threshold, ending two consecutive terms in parliament ([ПЕСС, 2019](#)). In the 2019 elections, led by the former Minister of Economy Gennady Kokoeva ([ТАСС, 2019](#)), a Republican list of 12 candidates was accepted on 17 May ([ПЕС, 2019](#)) as well as a list of 14 candidates for single-mandate constituencies.

Fydybasta
(Социалистическая партия Отечества “Фыдыбаста”)



The socialist Fydybasta party is a relatively minor opposition force in South Ossetia. The movement was born in the 1990s before becoming a political party in 1999 under the leadership of Vyacheslav Gobozov. The party has a socialist political ideology ([Эхо Кавказа, 2019](#)), is anti-Russian and has been involved in discussions with the authorities in Tbilisi. It has around 800 members ([ПЕС, 2019](#)). The party failed to enter the parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2014. In 2019, the party was led by its original ideologue Vyacheslav Gobozov, the former head of the committee for information and presidential representative in the parliament ([ТАСС, 2019](#); [Civil.ge, 2019](#)). On 17 May 2019, a list of 13 candidates on the party list was registered by the CEC and only one candidate out of the original six for single-mandate constituencies ([ПЕС, 2019](#)).

Communist party

(Коммунистическая партия Республика Южная Осетия)



The Communist Party is the oldest party in South Ossetia. Created in April 1993 after the war, Stanislav Kochiev was the First Secretary of the Central Committee. On May 15 1993, the Communist Party of South Ossetia was admitted to the Union of Communist Parties-Communist Party of the Soviet Union (UCP–CPSU) ([Лабиринт](#)). The party, represented for more than twenty years in the legislature failed to enter parliament in 2014, only receiving 4.41% of the vote ([Civil Georgia, 2019](#)). In 2019, led by Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Inal Urigaev, nine candidates were registered from the Republican list on 16 May 2019 and 11 candidates for the single-mandate constituencies on 17 May 2019 ([ПЕС, 2019](#)).

Rodina

(Родина)

The Rodina party was founded in December 2012 and officially registered in May 2013 by the Ministry of Justice under Dombay Gassiev ([15-й Регион Медиа, 2012](#)). It has around 700 members. In the 2019 elections, the original leader of the party gave way to a young member, Irtozh Dudayty. Rodina's programme is based on three principles, "civil society, agricultural support and entrepreneurship" ([ПЕС, 2019](#)). Particular attention was paid to the development of social measures to ensure the well-being of the population (Ibid). For the 2019 elections, the Republican list was rejected, while four candidates were granted permission on 17 May 2019 to compete for the single-mandate constituencies. On 15 September 2022, the party was liquidated following a decision of the Supreme Court resulting from "violations of the compliance of the Party's activities with the statutory goals and objectives and the current legislation" ([ПЕС, 2022](#)).

Appendix IV. Results of the 2019 Parliamentary Elections in South Ossetia

| Proportional party-list seats | | | | Single-mandate constituencies | | | Total seats |
|--|---------------|--------------|-----------|-------------------------------|---|-----------|-------------|
| Party | Votes | % | Seats | Votes | % | Seats | |
| United Ossetia | 7,778 | 34.96% | 7 | | | 7 | 14 |
| People's Party | 4,849 | 21.79% | 4 | | | 1 | 5 |
| Nykhas | 3,198 | 14.37% | 3 | | | 1 | 4 |
| Socialist Party "Unity of the People" | 2,883 | 12.96% | 2 | | | 1 | 3 |
| Communist party of RSO | 1,622 | 7.29% | 1 | | | 1 | 2 |
| Fatherland Socialist Party "Fydybasta" | 710 | 3.20% | 0 | | | 0 | 0 |
| Unity Party | 630 | 2.83% | 0 | | | 0 | 0 |
| Rodina (registration refused) | / | / | / | | | / | / |
| Independents | / | / | / | | | 6 | 6 |
| Against all republican lists of candidates | 579 | 2.60% | - | | - | - | |
| Total of votes | 22,249 | 100 % | 17 | | | 17 | 34 |

Source: Marie Beslier, based on the CEC official publication of the results ([Центральная избирательная комиссия Республики Южная Осетия, 2019; PECC, 2019](#))

Appendix V. Political parties competing in the Abkhazian parliamentary elections (2022)

Amtsakhara (Амцахара)



Amtsakhara was first established in March 1999 as a non-governmental organisation uniting veterans from the war with Georgia. In 2002 it was transformed into a socio-political organisation. On June 27, 2013, at the congress of the Amtsakhara, the republican public organisation was transformed into a political party. Garik Kharitonovich Samanba and Otar Kachevich Lomiya were elected co-chairs at the congress. Today, it has more than three thousand people and is the largest in Abkhazia. ([Амцахара](#)). Its members have been advocating “for a common policy and compromise, peace and harmony, for an impartial discussion of problems and ensuring stability in society” (Ibid). It is currently the main pro-presidential political force. The party is led by Lesik Tsugba. The party was registered on 24 January and nominated nine candidates on 1 February.

People's Front for Justice and Development (Народный фронт за справедливость и развитие)



The People’s Front for Justice and Development party was officially established on 20 January 2016 at its founding congress attended by 65 people. It is led by Lasha Sakania and, in fact, is a phantom party which exists only on paper. The party was established as a “constructive opposition to the authorities” ([Абхазия- Информ, 2016](#)). The then president of the party was Raul Khadjimba. The party then denounced “a distributive economy, a shadow market, and nomenklatura (bureaucratic) capitalism” (Ibid). Their desire to foster a middle class is part of the consolidation of the modern Abkhaz statehood. Their political objective is “pulling [our] people out of poverty and protecting them socially”(Ibid). The party was registered on 21 January, and nominated one candidate on 4 February.

Апсны
(АПСНЫ)



Apsny was created 19 May 2016 ([Нужная газета](#), 2016; [Эхо Кавказа](#), 2016). The party was registered on 25 January and nominated 2 candidates on 9 February.

People's Party of Abkhazia
(Народная партия Абхазии)



The People's Party of Abkhazia was founded in March 1992. It was led by Yakub Lakoba during the post-war years. Despite its very active leadership, the actual size of the organisation was negligible all these years. After Yakub Lakoba passed away in 2021, the PPA effectively ceased to de-facto exist but still does de-jure. The party was registered on 24 January and nominated a candidate on 1 February.

Party of Economic Development of Abkhazia
(Партия экономического развития Абхазии)



The Party of Economic Development of Abkhazia (ERA) was created on the 26 September 2007 and led by Beslan Butba, the former Prime Minister and owner of Abkhazia's private television station Abaza TV (Абаза-ТВ). In 2014, the party he led was part of the coalition that effectively overthrew the incumbent President Alexander Ankvab. A new election resulted in the victory of opposition leader Raul Khadjimba, with Beslan Butba as Prime Minister. He was dismissed a year later. In 2017, Butba ran into serious problems with business he was conducting in Russia, and incurred huge debts, some of which had to be paid off with existing assets in Abkhazia. He now lives abroad and is not involved in Abkhazian political life. The ERA party, left without its founder, now exists only on paper. No party congress has been held since 2016 (International expert n°8).

Beslan Butba's former assistant, Tia Arshba, who calls herself the chairperson of the party, sometimes makes statements on behalf of the ERA, though, the party has no other active members (Ibid). The party has a liberal social agenda and works for "development, [to] real independence, [to] prosperity", and for Abkhazia "to become strong, rich and prosperous" ([Партия "ЭРА"](#)). It is part of the Council for the National Unity of the Republic of Abkhazia (CNURA), which was created in September 2016 by the Communist Party and brings together political forces that are neither pro-government nor pro-opposition, including: Party of Economic Development of Abkhazia, United Abkhazia, the People's Party of Abkhazia, the Abkhaz Union of Afghanistan Veterans and the Foundation for International Business Cooperation. In the 2022 elections, the party was registered on 21 January (the first day) and nominated two candidates by 5 February.

Appendix VI. Results of the Parliamentary Elections in Abkhazia.

Results of the 1st round of the Parliamentary Elections in Abkhazia, March 12, 2022.

| Constituencies | Winner | Party | Votes | % | Invalid votes | Total voters | Registered voters | Turnout |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------|---------|---------------|--------------|-------------------|---------|
| 5 (Sinopsky) | Lasha Ashuba | Independent | 1,872 | 98.4% | 30 | 1,902 | 3,997 | 47.59 % |
| 9 (Vostochny) | Kan Kvarchiya | Independent | 1,172 | 53.74% | 40 | 2,181 | 3,033 | 71.91% |
| 10 (Pitsundsky) | Daut Khutaba | Independent | 1,306 | 98.27 % | 23 | 1329 | 4,364 | 30.45 % |
| 11 (Bzypsky) | Timur Beiiia | Independent | 1,628 | 77.49 % | 130 | 2,101 | 5,276 | 39.82% |
| 12 (Gagrsky) | Astamur Arshba | Independent | 1,250 | 51.17 % | 100 | 2,443 | 4,542 | 53.79 % |
| 14 (Tsandrypshsky) | Galust Trapizonyan | Independent | 1,819 | 96.65 % | 63 | 1,882 | 5,453 | 34.51 % |
| 16 (Duripshsky) | Beslan Khalvash | Independent | 1,366 | 70.09 % | 84 | 1,949 | 4,055 | 48.06% |
| 17 (Lykhynsky) | Aslan Lakoba | Independent | 1,334 | 63.49 % | 73 | 2,101 | 3,767 | 55.77% |
| 19 (Gudaitsky Gorodskoy Vtoroy) | Alkhas Khagba | Independent | 962 | 58.48 % | 49 | 1,645 | 3,181 | 51.71% |
| 23 (Gumistinsky) | Levon Galustian | Independent | 1,020 | 52.69 % | 52 | 1,936 | 3,305 | 58.58% |
| 24 (Pshapsky) | Ashot Minosyan | Independent | 1,057 | 64.57 % | 81 | 1,637 | 3,350 | 48.87% |
| 25 (Macharsky) | Inar Sadzba | Independent | 1,314 | 50.89 % | 123 | 2,582 | 5,199 | 49.66% |
| 26 (Drandsky) | Adgur Kharazia | Independent | 1,158 | 50.28 % | 139 | 2,303 | 3,950 | 58.30% |
| 27 (Baslakhusky) | Venori Bebia | Independent | 966 | 65.85 % | 65 | 1,467 | 2,367 | 61.98% |
| 30 (Kutolsky) | Vakhtang Golandzia | Independent | 1,006 | 58.02 % | 62 | 1,734 | 2,462 | 70.43% |
| 31 (Kyndygsy) | Rezo Zantaria | Independent | 940 | 56.39 % | 72 | 1,667 | 2,354 | 70.82% |
| 35 (Galsky) | Temur Shergelia | Independent | 604 | 52.61 % | 71 | 1,148 | 1,445 | 79.45% |

Source: Marie Beslier, based on [Sputnik, 2022](#); [Абхазия-Информ, 2022](#); and [Апсныпресс, 2022](#).

Results of the 2nd round of the Parliamentary Elections in Abkhazia, April 26, 2022.

| Constituencies | Winner | Party | Votes |
|---------------------------|------------------|-------------|-------|
| 1 (New District) | Inar Gitsba | Independent | 1,287 |
| 2 (New District) | Astamur Gerhelia | Amtsakhara | 1,024 |
| 3 (Stariy Poselok) | Narsou Salakaya | Independent | 1,215 |
| 4 (Severnoy) | Erik Rshtuni | Independent | 1,015 |
| 6 (Centralny) | Dmitriy Marshan | Independent | 1,763 |
| 7 (Biblioteka) | Rashida Aiba | Independent | 1,213 |
| 13 (Gagra city) | Bartsits Alkhas | Independent | 2,109 |
| 15 (Otkharsky) | Badrik Pilia | Independent | 1,130 |
| 20 (Aatsynskiy) | Alisa Gularia | Amtsakhara | 1,451 |
| 21 (Novoafonsky) | Akhra Pachulia | Independent | 928 |
| 22 (Eshersky) | Fazlibey Avidzba | Independent | 741 |
| 28 (Gupsky) | Demur Gogia | Independent | 922 |
| 29 (Chlousky) | Almas Akaba | Amtsakhara | 1,038 |
| 32 (Ochamchyrsky) | Batal Jopua | Independent | 1,189 |
| 33 (Tkuarchalskiy Pervyy) | Beslan Emurkhba | Amtsakhara | 1,372 |
| 34 (Tkuarchalskiy Vtoroy) | German Kacharava | Independent | 854 |

Source: Marie Beslier, based on [Апсныпресс, 2022](#); and [Sputnik, 2022](#).

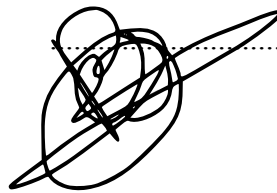
Re-run Elections, 14th of May and 11th of June

| Date | Constituency | Winner | Party | Votes |
|---|--------------|------------------|-------------|-------|
| 14th of May | 18 | Leonid Lakerbaia | Aitaira | 1,279 |
| 11th of June (2nd round) (both candidates received the same number of votes in the 1st round or the re-run, a first in Abkhazia's history) | 8 | Naur Narmania | Independent | 776 |

Source: Marie Beslier, based on [Civil.ge, 2022](#); and [Sputnik, 2022](#).

Appendix VII. Author's declaration

I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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.....
/ signature of author /

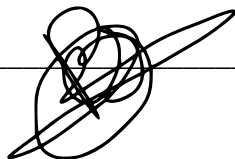
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