

De Facto States and Democracy: The Case of Abkhazia

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Abstract. De-facto states constitute an interesting and important anomaly in the international system of sovereign states. No matter how successful and efficient in the administration of their territories they are, they fail to achieve international recognition. In the past, their claims for independence were based primarily on the right to national self-determination, historical continuity and claim for a remedial right to secession, based on alleged human-rights violations. Since 2005, official representatives of several de facto states have repeatedly emphasised the importance of democracy promotion in their political entities. A possible explanation of this phenomenon dwells in the belief that those states which have demonstrated their economic viability and promote the organization of a democratic state should gain their sovereignty. This article demonstrates the so called “democracy-for-recognition strategy” in the case study of Abkhazia. On the basis of the field research in Abkhazia we identify factors that promote, as well as those that obstruct the democratisation process in the country.

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1. Introduction

De facto states are an anomaly in the Westphalian system of states. If we look at a political map of the world consisting of coloured spots representing individual states, most likely we will not find them. Yet they exist. Some call them separatist states, others self-declared or unrecognised states, however, current literature, as we will demonstrate later, mostly employs the term *de facto* states, because it clearly demonstrates the nature of such an entity. It *de facto* exists, however, the international community does not recognise it as an independent state. All of the *de facto* states, as it comes from their definition provided later in this article, struggle for international recognition, and use several distinct strategies in order to reach this goal. One of them is the democratisation-for-recognition strategy, based on a conviction of *de facto* states representatives that the international community will recognise their political entities if they are democratic (e.g. Broers 2005; Popescu 2006; Caspersen 2009; Berg and Mölder 2012; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2012).

A growing number of studies have dealt with the phenomenon of democratisation in *de facto* states since the second half of the first decade of the 21st century, e.g., Protsyk (2009, 2012) focused on democratisation in Transnistria, Azam (2013) on Somaliland, Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2012) on Nagorno-Karabakh, Smolnik (2012) on elections in Nagorno-Karabakh, von Steinsdorff (2012), von Steinsdorff and Fruhstorfer (2012), and Berg and Mölder (2012) focused on the comparison of democratic institutions and their legitimacies in *de facto* states in the post-Soviet area, Simão (2012) on the role of the EU in democracy promotion in *de facto* states. The presented article reflects in part the results of these studies, and at the same time, brings a new and detailed view of the examined topic. The starting point for our study is a presumption that democratisation-for-recognition strategy is a conscious process that is to legitimate claims of independence and international recognition. As such, it

is a political tool and thus it can remain on the level of political declarations or it can proceed further to the real and measurable shift to a more democratic and free society. The question is then, what causes such a shift and how exactly this process of democratisation in the specific conditions of a *de facto* state proceeds. The objective of our study is, on the case of Abkhazia, to identify the factors which contribute to the gradual democratisation of a *de facto* state as well as those which hinder it.

2. De facto states – what they are and what they are not

Sovereignty, both internal and external, is one of the constitutive attributes of a modern state. There are, however, states, which have problems in exercising their external or internal sovereignty. On one hand, there are internationally recognised states which cease to perform certain functions which are expected of a modern state, such as individual security, social services, equitable economic growth, etc. In the taxonomy of weak statehood, these entities range from weak states, through failing states, to collapsed states (Jackson, 1993; Zartman, 1995; Rotberg, 2004; Šmíd and Vaďura, 2009). The states in the second category are admittedly capable of performing sovereign legislative, executive and judicial power over their territories, they struggle for independence, but lack international recognition, or are recognised by only a few other states (Pegg, 1998). There are many terms commonly used in connection with such entities, for example unrecognised states, separatist states, quasi states, informal states, pseudo states or *de facto* states (Kollosov and O'Loughlin, 1998; Pegg, 1998; Isachenko, 2012). In this study we employ Kolstø's (2006: 725–726) definition of *de facto* state. It is a territory where (1) political leadership must be in control of (most of) the territory it lays claim to, (2) it must have sought but not achieved international recognition as an in-

dependent state, and (3) it has to persist in the state of non-recognition for more than two years.

Pegg (1998: 28–42) distinguishes *de facto* states from other atypical entities, such as: (1) power vacuums, (2) terrorist groups, (3) other entities, which have political character, but do not seek international recognition, (4) puppet states, (5) separatist regions, which have chosen peaceful secession, (6) states, which are internationally recognised by at least two permanent members of the UN Security Council or a majority of member states of the UN General Assembly, and (7) political entities in existence shorter than two years.

Currently, based on Kolstø's and Pegg's criteria, six entities are commonly considered as *de facto* states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Northern Cyprus and Somaliland (e.g. Kolstø, 2006; Caspersen, 2008b; Berg and Toomla, 2009). All of them were formed as a consequence of armed conflicts in the second half of the 20th century, and up to the present time political representatives of these *de facto* states and parent countries have not been able to find a mutually acceptable solution to the political status of the newly formed political entities. And thus, even though the armed phases of the conflicts have ended, the conflicts persist and are often labelled as being frozen, protracted, or intractable.

From a historical perspective, more entities could be listed as *de facto* states. Caspersen and Stansfield (2011: 4) show, that 21 *de facto* states had been formed since the end of World War II, such as Biafra in 1967–1970, Katanga in 1960–1963, Serbian Krajina in 1991–1995, Eritrea before 1993, Tamil Eelam before 2009, Chechnya in the 1990s etc. Taiwan is a special case due to its economic importance and privatisation of bilateral relations with the USA and the EU. It does not declare itself as a state which is independent of the People's Republic of China, but as a parallel Chinese government – The Republic of China (Taiwan). Kosovo is another specific case, which can be no longer considered to be a *de facto* state according to Kolstø's and Pegg's criteria. After the unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008, this entity was subsequently internationally recognised by the majority of countries represented in the UN General Assembly (currently by 111 countries) and by three permanent members of the UN Security Council, and

thus it can relatively easily enter the international scene. All its major partners recognise its independence. Unlike some authors (Geldenhuis, 2009) we have also not included Palestine to the group of *de facto* states. The reason is that since 1988, when the Palestinian Declaration of Independence proclaimed the establishment of the State of Palestine, this political entity has been gradually recognised by dozens of UN member states. Currently (January 2016) 70 % of the 193 member states of the United Nations have recognised the State of Palestine. Moreover, in 2012 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution changing Palestine's entity status to non-member observer state. Palestine also faces completely different problems than *de facto* states as we have defined them. It does not need to struggle for international recognition, but it has to negotiate, under the supervision of the international community, its borders and mutual relations with Israel. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) represents another borderline case. We do not include it in the group of *de facto* states because the crucial problem of the SADR is not the missing international recognition (all African states except Morocco recognise it), but the fact that its government controls only about 20–25 % of the territory it lays claim to (e.g. Omar, 2008). Sometimes even the Kurdish government in northern Iraq is perceived as a *de facto* state (Gunter, 2008; Stansfield 2003), however, Kurdish authorities have not actively sought for international recognition, either before the Second Gulf War or after it, and thus Kurdistan cannot be counted among *de facto* states according to Kolstø's and Pegg's definitions.

3. De facto states in political geography and political science

Since the era of Ratzel, a state has been one of the central topics of research in political geography. With the re-emergence of the political geography in the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of state and state functions had been perceived through the (neo-)Marxist paradigm (e.g. Johnston, 1989). However, at the beginning of the 1990s, research into a state in political geography gained new dynamics. The post-bipolar world produced numerous challenges in the field of the theory of a state which

political geography reflects on (e.g. Cox, 2002: 243–273; Kuus and Agnew, 2008; Corbridge, 2008; Silvey, 2010), be it the question of territoriality (Taylor, 1994; Agnew, 2010; Reid-Henry, 2010), or the problems of sovereignty (Agnew, 2009; Coleman and Grove, 2009; Mountz, 2013), unequal development of states (Cox, 2002: 275–322; Sheppard, 2012), failing states (Luke and Ó Tuathail, 1997; Hastings, 2009; Ištók and Koziak, 2010), and separatism (Agnew, 2001; Baar, 2001; O’Loughlin and Ó Tuathail, 2009; Riegl and Doboš, 2014).

The political-geographical research on de facto states is connected to the research on separatism, as well as on sovereignty (Flint, 2002: 394–395). However, it was not geographers, but political scientist who started to use the concept of unrecognised or de facto states as early as in 1960s (J. A. Frowein). During the 1980s the unrecognised states (quasi-states) were mentioned by Jackson and Rosberg (1982) and Jackson (1987). In 1980s and 1990s also political geographers noticed the emergence of specific political territorial units that challenged the Westphalian system of states; however, the terminology was yet not clear, and these entities had been referred to by several somewhat confusing terms. Glassner and De Blij (1988) included unrecognised political entities under the fuzzy category of quasi-states, Releya (1998) wrote about trans-state entities which he metaphorically described as “postmodern cracks in the Westphalian dam”, and Kolossov and O’Loughlin (1998) used Kaplan’s metaphor about “ends of the earth” and called these entities pseudo-states or quasi-states. However, the beginnings of systematic research on the phenomenon of de facto states date back to the second half of the 1990s. The ground-breaking work in this regard was Pegg’s (1998) monograph “International Society and the De Facto State”. It contained both theoretical discussion on de facto states, as well as several case studies. Since then academic studies have mostly focused on post-Soviet territory, where the majority of de facto states was and still is located.

Until now, research on de facto states has been mostly conducted by political scientists or specialists in the field of security studies, international relations or area studies (Pegg, 1998; King, 2001; Lynch, 2002, 2004; Kolstø, 2006; Popescu, 2006, 2007; Berg, 2007; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2012; Caspersen, 2008a, 2009, 2011, 2012; Protsyk, 2009; Caspers-

en and Stansfield, 2011; Simão, 2012; Pegg and Berg 2014). Contributions by political geographers deal with particular problems of de facto stateness. Kolossov, O’Loughlin and Ó Tuathail (Toal) focused on attitudes of citizens of de facto states to certain political issues (O’Loughlin and Ó Tuathail, 2009; O’Loughlin, Kolossov and Ó Tuathail, 2011; Toal and O’Loughlin, 2013). Baar, Hoch and Kopeček focused on post-conflict reconstruction and democratisation in de facto states (Hoch, Kopeček and Baar, 2012; Hoch, Souleimanov and Baranec, 2014; Kopeček, Hoch and Baar, 2016). Bakke et al., (2014) and Baev (2007) focused on de facto states and civil wars in Post-Soviet area, Rudincová (2010) on relations of Somaliland to neighbouring states and international organizations, and Riegl (2010) attempted to develop Glassner’s and de Blij’s term quasi-state.

There were basically two periods of the research on de facto states. Until 2004 the image of de facto states in academic literature was quite negative. Kolossov and O’Loughlin (1998) claimed that in the post-Soviet territory the elites of unrecognised states had strong criminal backgrounds and specialised in the illegal trade of weapons, drugs, and in money laundering. Lynch (2004: 4) characterised de facto states as highly criminal environments in which local politicians were puppets in the hands of external actors. In the case of Georgia’s breakaway regions and in Transnistria, Russia was seen as the key actor controlling the “puppet governments”; in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh it was Armenia. The same author describes Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh as entities which do have the institutional features of statehood, but are unable to fill it with solid content (Lynch, 2004: 4). The interconnection between organised crime and domestic political leaders was also mentioned by King (2001) and Collier and Hoeffler (2004). Their arguments rest on the assumption (theory of greed and grievance in civil wars) that many conflicts (not only in de facto states) are often kept alive by top political leaders. These leaders benefit from the shadow economy, which flourishes as a consequence of the lack of control mechanisms, which were largely destroyed by the conflict.

The second phase began in 2005, when some authors started to emphasise also certain positive aspects of the post-Soviet de facto states. Caspers-

en (2008a: 117) agrees that Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh are far from liberal democracies, but she claims that the levels of democracy in these regions are almost the same or even better than in their mother countries – Georgia and Azerbaijan. Broers (2005) and Popescu (2006) were also among those who started to stress the economic and social changes that de facto states have undergone in the last few years. It was during this second phase of research on de facto states when the democratisation-for-recognition strategy has been formulated (e.g. Broers, 2005; Popescu, 2006; Caspersen, 2009; Berg and Mölder, 2012; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2012).

4. Democratisation-for-recognition strategy – formulation of the problem

Since around 2005, it has been possible to record a significant increase of statements by official state representatives in de facto states emphasising the importance of democracy promotion in their political units. For example, Ashot Ghulyan, the chairman of the Parliament of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, declared that “Nagorno-Karabakh has control over its entire claimed territory, has independent institutions with separated legislative, executive and judicial powers. Free elections have been held in Nagorno-Karabakh since the 1990s, governments alternate here and there is a functional civil society. Therefore, I believe we have really solid foundations for international recognition of our country” (1). Arkadi Ghukasyan, the former President of Nagorno-Karabakh, stated at a press conference at Stepanakert in 2006 that “people who have a very ... democratic constitution ... have more chances of being recognised by the international community than others” (Caspersen, 2009: 55–56). Democracy is also seen as an important element related to international recognition in Transnistria. The still valid concept of foreign policy mentions among key priorities “protection of human rights, freedoms, and dignity regardless of ethnicity” or “commitment to only peaceful, political and democratic negotiating methods in the settlement of relations with the Republic of Moldova” (MFA-PMR, 2005). Pridnestrovie.net (2010), an im-

portant Transnistrian portal, suggestively stated in its title page: “Since the declaration of independence in 1990 Transnistria relies on export-oriented economy, its own government and plurality democracy, where the former opposition controls the parliament now. Is this enough for Transnistria to be incorporated into the map of Europe? ... Current Transnistria is an example of how previously oppressed people could form, through democracy, a free and successful nation”.

However, for the purpose of our study it is necessary to differentiate between political statements without any significant measurable impact on the state of democracy and a real and measurable shift towards more democratic society. Thus, from six currently existing de facto states we select the most likely case of successful democratisation-for-recognition strategy and carry out a detailed analysis of this case. The selection of a studied case is therefore governed by two basic criteria: first, the examined case must be a de facto state according to Kolstø's and Pegg's criteria and, second, an unambiguous and empirically measurable shift to a more democratic and liberated society has had to occur in this state during the previous decade. The only case meeting these criteria is Abkhazia. If we focus on Kolstø's criteria, then Abkhazia, first, controls the entire claimed territory, second, seeks independence but it has only been recognised by a few states, third, this condition has existed for more than two years – specifically, for twenty years. Abkhazia declared independence from Georgia as early as 1992 and in the following two years Abkhazian forces gained control over the majority of the claimed territory. In 1994, the Abkhazian Parliament passed the Constitution of Abkhazia which was confirmed by referendum in 1999. In the same year, based on the results of the aforementioned referendum, Abkhazia declared its independence as well as the democratic character of the state again through the Act of State Independence of Abkhazia. During the Russian-Georgian War in August 2008 Abkhazia also gained control over the last part of the claimed territory (the upper section of the Kodori River Valley) and it has been gradually recognised as an independent state by several UN member states – Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru (2).

Whether Abkhazia has been democratised can be determined by means of the dataset of Free-

dom in the World. There are currently more datasets which identify the type of political regime of a respective country and/or their political stability or transitions between various regimes, but there is not a large selection in the case of de facto states. Classic datasets, such as Polity IV, The Economist Index of Democracy, or territorially limited Nations in Transit published by the non-governmental organisation Freedom House, only contain data on internationally recognised states. Only Freedom in the World, also published by Freedom House, gradually includes in its evaluations territories which are not internationally recognised as independent states: de facto states, dependent territories, protectorates, some autonomous territories, etc.

The basis for calculating the Freedom in the World index is two sets of “Yes/No” questions (one set on political rights, the other on civil liberties). The questions are answered by a group of experts who can express their yes/no on a scale from 1 to 4 (1 – yes, 2 – rather yes, 3 – rather no, 4 – no). The resulting scores, both for political rights, and for civil liberties are summed up and according to the number of the obtained score every state is awarded grade 1 (the best) through grade 7 (the worst). In the final stage, two calculated grades are averaged and states are included in three categories – free, partly free, and not free.

The problem of the Freedom in the World dataset is that it explicitly measures the rate of freedom, and not democracy. These two phenomena surely relate to each other, but they definitely cannot be made equal. As already pointed out by Zakaria (2003), civil rights can be quite well ensured by a principally authoritarian regime. However, if we view the sub-categories of Freedom in the World, on which the two final grades are based, we find that these subcategories are highly similar to the ones on which e.g. the Economist Index of Democracy is based, which considers itself to be a tool for measuring democracy. In the case of the Democracy Index, the subcategories are as follows: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties; in the case of Freedom in the World, they are: electoral process, political pluralism and participation, functioning of government, freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law and personal autonomy, and in-

dividual rights (EIU, 2013; Freedom House, 2014a). Freedom in the World is a more varied dataset and it aims at measuring freedom, but as its criteria are set, it measures at the same time the democratic character of the country in question. Within the categories set by Freedom in the World it is impossible to perform the division into classes as in the Democracy Index (full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime, authoritarianism), nonetheless it can be stated, based on data for a longer period of time, whether the status of political rights and civil liberties in the country in question has been improving or worsening, and thus whether the country democratises or not.

The evaluation of Freedom in the World for six current de facto states in 1994–2014 is summarised in Table 1. Northern Cyprus has been evaluated by Freedom in the World since 1982, however, our table starts with 1994 when Freedom in the World started to evaluate the second de facto state – Nagorno-Karabakh. After viewing Table 1, it is obvious that although the average score of political rights and civil liberties is better at the end of the examined period than at its beginning, it can be hardly said that all of the de facto states have been experiencing steady democratisation. For Transnistria and South Ossetia the score remains identical for the entire monitored period, and in contrast, it decreases in the case of Somaliland. The score of political rights as well as civil liberties for Nagorno-Karabakh is more favourable at the end of the monitored period than at its beginning, but during the monitored period there were significant fluctuations in the evaluation of both categories. The score in 2014 is therefore identical with the score in 1999. Thus, it cannot be unambiguously claimed that Nagorno-Karabakh has been experiencing a continuous democratisation process. From the 1990s until the present, only Northern Cyprus and Abkhazia show a clearly more favourable score of both monitored criteria without negative fluctuations. In the case of Northern Cyprus, since 2001, both indicators have been at grade 2, which means a free country in the terminology of Freedom in the World. With regard to the fact that the conflict which resulted in the establishment of Northern Cyprus has not been settled up so far, it is difficult to imagine that the evaluation of one or even both criteria improved to grade 1, i.e. to the same level as

in, e.g., Sweden, Norway, Germany or other western European countries. Despite this fact, Northern Cyprus has the same evaluation as Romania or Bulgaria, both members of the European Union. It has reached, considering its situation, the feasible maximum and further democratisation will only be possible in the case of finding a mutually acceptable

solution to the Cyprus conflict. Northern Cyprus is therefore an unsuitable candidate for the needs of our study because it had democratised before the democratisation-for-recognition strategy started to be purposely applied by the elites of de facto states. The only de facto state which little by little, but constantly, democratises is ultimately Abkhazia.

Table 1. Political rights and civil liberties in de facto states (1994–2014)

year	Abkhazia		Nagorno-Karabakh		Northern Cyprus		Somaliland		South Ossetia		Transnistria	
	PR ^a	CL ^b	PR	CL	PR	CL	PR	CL	PR	CL	PR	CL
1994	-	-	7	7	4	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
1995	-	-	7	7	4	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
1996	-	-	6	6	4	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
1997	-	-	6	6	4	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
1998	6	5	5	6	4	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
1999	6	5	5	5	4	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
2000	6	5	5	6	4	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
2001	6	5	5	6	2	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
2002	6	5	5	6	2	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
2003	6	5	5	5	2	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
2004	6	5	5	5	2	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
2005	6	5	5	5	2	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
2006	5	5	5	5	2	2	-	-	-	-	6	6
2007	5	5	5	5	2	2	4	4	-	-	6	6
2008	5	5	5	5	2	2	4	4	-	-	6	6
2009	5	5	5	5	2	2	5	4	7	6	6	6
2010	5	5	5	5	2	2	5	5	7	6	6	6
2011	5	5	6	5	2	2	4	5	7	6	6	6
2012	5	5	6	5	2	2	4	5	7	6	6	6
2013	4	5	5	5	2	2	4	5	7	6	6	6
2014	4	5	5	5	2	2	4	5	7	6	6	6

Explanation: ^a Political rights – 1 the best grade, 7 – the worst grade

^b Civil liberties – 1 the best grade, 7 – the worst grade

Source: Freedom House, 2014b

5. Material and research methods

The objective of our study is not to verify hypotheses, but to inductively generate knowledge on a carefully selected case. We monitor the democratisation in Abkhazia by means of process tracing, i.e. we decompose the whole democratisation process to a chain of events among which causal re-

lations can be traced. On the basis of these causal relations we can identify factors which support or prevent the democratisation in Abkhazia.

The data collection reflected the complicated reality of the de facto state and, in particular the safety of researchers as well as interviewed people had to be ensured. The authors therefore strived to use existing and published data as much as possible. This was ensured during the first stage of data

collection during which the already published data (scientific articles, reports of non-governmental organisations, articles from local media etc.) were collected and areas with insufficient or completely missing data were identified. These gaps were specifically filled during the second stage of data collection which was implemented directly in the field in Abkhazia in October 2009. The third stage – second field research in Abkhazia – was carried out in June and July 2014. Respondents belonging to the local civil society as well as the political elites were found by means of the snowball sampling method (Birnacki and Waldorf, 1981; Browne, 2005; Noy, 2008).

In 2009, two gatekeepers (a leading representative of a non-profit organisation and a former adviser of a prominent Abkhazian politician, currently working as an independent journalist) were selected and contacted in advance on the basis of publicly available information. They provided contacts to further potential respondents. The interview with the gatekeepers, who were contacted beforehand, was always preceded by biographic preliminary research, which helped the authors suitably lay out the topic of the interviews. Thanks to the gatekeepers' contacts, we were able to carry out interviews with a member of the Abkhazian Parliament, an Abkhazian freelance journalist, an academic from the Abkhazian State University, a representative of Abkhazian civil sector and with students of Abkhazian State University. The other interviews were mostly conducted upon the recommendation of the gatekeepers. The acquired interviews cannot be unambiguously categorised due to the sometimes difficult conditions in the field, the necessity to adapt to local conditions and to respond to continuously collected data. The interviews with the gatekeepers were expert interviews framed to a four-stage elicitation process (cf. Flick, 2009: 165–169), consisting of: (1) an overview interview, where an expert freely expressed his/her opinion on the given problems; (2) a structured interview, where an expert answered the researcher's specific questions reflecting the expert's statements from the overview interview; (3) analyses of the acquired data performed directly during the stay in the field; (4) supplementing questions presented to experts on the basis of continuously acquired data. Other interviews had a freer structure as they had to take into account the respondent's personality and the situation they were conducted in.

In the 2014 field research, the first gatekeeper was an important representative of the journalistic community with extensive contacts in civil society; the second gatekeeper was a high-ranking politician at the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thanks to the gatekeepers' contacts, we were able to carry out interviews with an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Member of the Abkhazian Parliament, a representative of the Public Chamber, an Abkhazian journalist, an academic from the Abkhazian State University, and a representative of an Abkhazian non-profit organization. All interviews had the character of expert interviews. In both field researches, the interviews were conducted in English or Russian and the length of the interviews ranged from 60 to 120 minutes. In principle, we do not disclose the names of respondents, which is a standard for researches in conflict zones in order to ensure the safety of the respondents. Affiliations of the respondents are also mentioned very loosely in order that a respondent cannot be identified even indirectly.

6. The present state of democracy in Abkhazia

Abkhazia is a territory in the eastern Black Sea Region, with an area of 8,700 km². During Soviet period it had a status of an autonomous republic within Georgia (Georgian SSR); however, disputes between the Abkhazians and the Georgians escalated into an armed conflict at the beginning of the 1990s. The result was 15,000 casualties, a decrease in the population from the original 525,000 to the present 241,000 inhabitants (3), and a completely destroyed infrastructure. Abkhazians gained control over nearly the whole territory of historical Abkhazia and declared their independence from Georgia. At the official level, the war ended in the peace treaties of April 1994, but even 20 years after their signing two key questions, without which long-lasting peace cannot be achieved, have not been resolved. The first is the political status of Abkhazia; the second is the conditions for the return of refugees. The insufficient progress of these questions makes the settlement of all the other issues under dispute significantly more difficult (4).

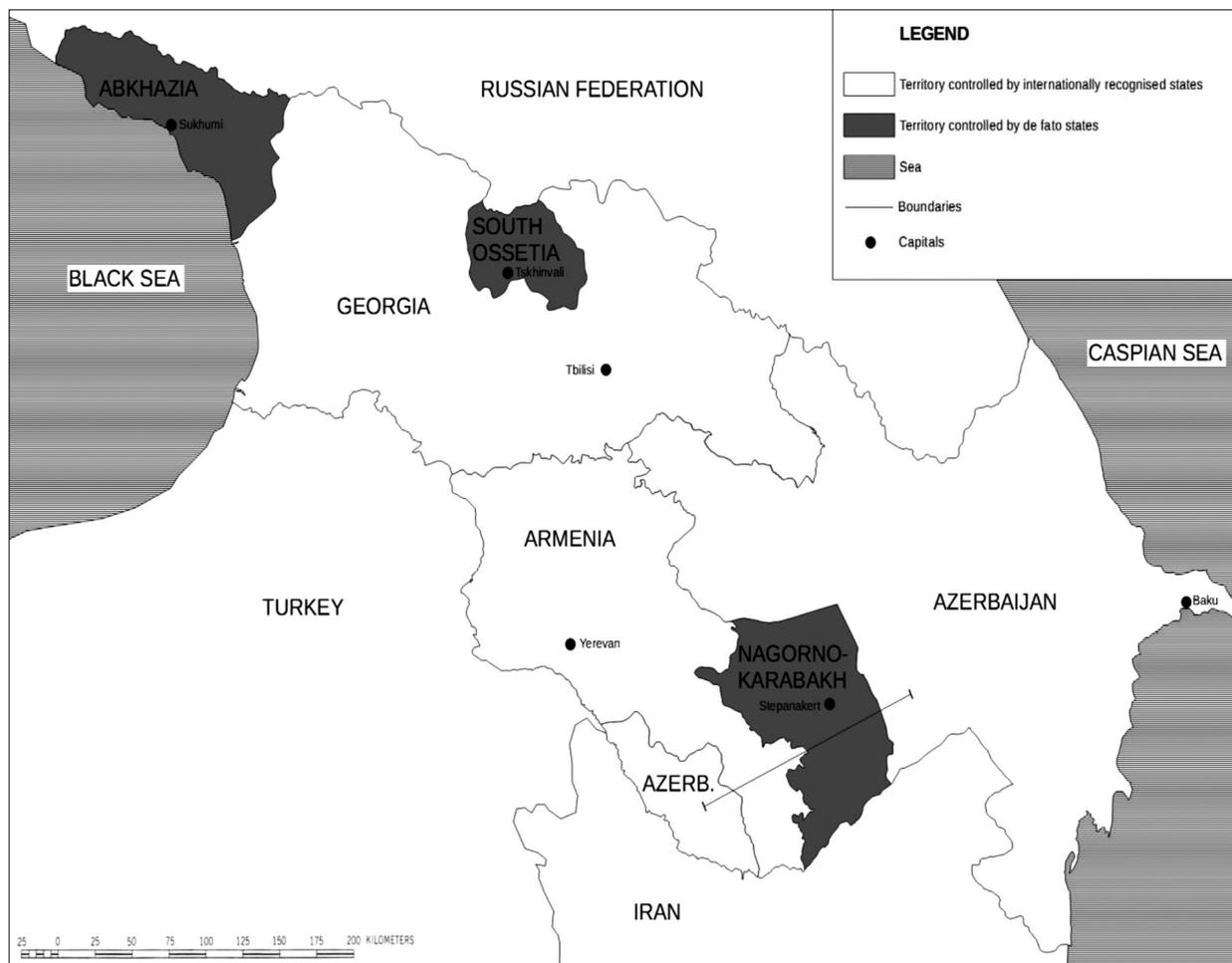


Fig. 1. De facto states in the Caucasus region

Source: Authors

From the Abkhazian point of view, the independence of Abkhazia is legally based on the adoption of the Constitution of 1994 and the consequent referendum in 1999, where the majority of inhabitants voted for the independence from Georgia. Over the past several years seeds of a relatively democratic political regime have appeared in Abkhazia. One of the essential signs of democracy is periodically recurring elections, in which inhabitants can select their representatives from several competing political parties. In March 2002 the followers of President Ardzinba won the parliamentary election with an overwhelming majority because the two most important opposition groups – the People's Party of Abkhazia (Apsny Azhlart Apartia) and the Revival Movement (Aitaira) withdrew their lists of candidates in protest against the manipulation of the pre-election campaign. All of the media were un-

der strong control of the state; both TV and radio showered voters with clear pro-governmental propaganda (Hoch, 2011: 90). Likewise, Vladislav Ardzinba was the sole candidate in all presidential elections during the 1990s.

A change occurred in 2004 when Ardzinba's resignation due to health reasons gave space for the contest of leaders belonging to the new political establishment. Although Raul Khadjimba was supported both by Ardzinba, and Russian President Putin, he did not win the first round of the presidential election and after a wave of demonstrations the election had to be repeated. It was won by Sergei Bagapsh, an opposition candidate, who under Russian pressure was forced to establish a government of national unity in which Khadjimba's followers obtained several chairs, but the gradual process of democratisation has been commenced.

After Bagapsh's victory, the civil society, including the media, started to be more active. In 2008, the number of non-profit organisations independent of state power exceeded 200, with 30 of them highly active and successful in fundraising (Mikhelidze and Pirozzi, 2008: 23). The independent media were crucial in supporting of the protests in 2004. A full dozen of them existed by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the majority of them financed from funds of western non-profit organisations, such as the Berghof Centre, International Alert or Conciliation Resources. Two of these media, *Chegemskaya Pravda* and *Grazhdanskoe Obshchestvo*, had also obtained subsidies from domestic sources as well. This could have been seen as a continuing of the positive development. However, as the most of budget of *Grazhdanskoe Obshchestvo* remained financed by the Western INGOs, this newspaper ceased to exist after the INGOs' budgetary allocations on issues related with the Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue were cut off (5).

Recognition of the independence of Abkhazia by Russia in August 2008, accompanied by security guarantees and a growing influx of Russian investments in Abkhazia significantly increased the chances of the then Abkhazian President, Sergei Bagapsh, for re-election. In 2009, he achieved a comfortable victory in the presidential election, when he defeated the opposing candidate, Raul Khadjimba, by more than 40 % of the votes. Bagapsh's unexpected death in May 2011 resulted again in a situation similar to that of 2004 when none of the candidates had sufficient support which would guarantee certain electoral victory in advance. Therefore, the 2011 presidential elections were again held in a competitive environment, which is rather rare in the post-Soviet region (Ó Beacháin, 2012: 168). There were three candidates, namely Alexander Ankvab (the former Vice-President and the incumbent President after Bagapsh's death), Sergei Shamba (the Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Raul Khadjimba (the former Vice-President, an opposition candidate). The first mentioned candidate won in the first round with more than 54 % of the votes. Despite the significant victory in the first round, observers agreed the fifth post-war presidential elections in Abkhazia were held peacefully, without major disputes and the defeated candidates accepted that they had lost (Freedom House, 2013). According to He-

witt (2011), this demonstrated an accumulation of democratic experience in this internationally unrecognised state. A year later, the last parliamentary election was held where only 13 candidates won majorities in the first round on March 10, and the remaining 22 seats required runoffs on March 24. Six of the nine incumbents seeking re-election were defeated, including the outgoing speaker of parliament. The voting marked a shift toward independents, who captured 28 seats, compared with only 3 for the ruling United Abkhazia Party (Apsny Akzaara) and 4 for opposition parties (Freedom House, 2013).

The situation changed in 2014. In May, the Abkhazian capital Sukhumi experienced a wave of protests, forcing President Ankvab to step down. The official rhetoric of the opposition, led by Raul Khadjimba (who stood without success in previous presidential elections), drew on arguments pointing out the poor economic situation and the long-term lack of essential reforms. These economic arguments, in opinion of our respondents, are certainly justified, but some of the respondents mentioned primarily political factors and spoke about a coup d'état (6).

In August 2014, Khadjimba was elected president; however, this election was, for the first time since 2004, far from fair and democratic. The large portion of the ethnic Georgian (Megrelian) inhabitants of the Gali district were deprived of voting rights, whereas polling stations in Russia and Turkey, enabling the members of the Abkhazian Diaspora to vote, were established. The campaign was dirty and struck by violence. Khadjimba won in the first round with 50.57 % of the votes. As Ó Beacháin (2014) puts it, "[h]ad Khadjimba secured a few hundred votes fewer, a second round would have been necessary. Had the Georgian voters of Gali retained their right to vote and the Abkhaz diaspora in Cherkessk and Turkey remained off the electoral list, a Khadjimba victory might not have been achievable."

7. Factors supporting democratisation

In the years 2004–2013, Abkhazia's political development was a clear example of democratisation process which was, to a large extent, supported by the

authorities. In our opinion, this situation can be explained by a combination of several factors, each of them constituting a metaphorical link in a chain of democratisation. Had one of these links not been present, the whole chain would have broken apart. The first link is the relatively long duration of Abkhazia's de facto existence which enabled other links to be forged. After the unambiguous homogenisation of (political) society in Abkhazia caused by the state of war at the beginning of the 1990s, a new area for plurality of opinions has appeared since the beginning of the new millennium. The poor social situation of most inhabitants combined with the visible wealth of political representatives in the region, where it is impossible to maintain anonymity with regard to the small area and population, strengthened the voices of regime's critics (7). Such voices appeared more significantly in Abkhazia in 2002. The Association of War Veterans, Amsakhara, criticised the President for his lack of leadership of the country and the surrender of power to the members of the oligarchy (8). Until that time Vladislav Ardzinba had been considered an untouchable hero. Important figures of public life started to join Amsakhara, and the political opposition which came to power as early as two years later strengthened. Years of relative stability in the "no war, no peace" situation increased the inhabitant's dissatisfaction with the domestic economic situation and corruption of state representatives. This was how the second link, i.e. critical civil society and plurality of the political environment, has been forged.

However, if the Abkhazian state, at the beginning of the 3rd millennium had been stronger, the government would not have allowed the blacksmiths who forged the second link of democracy to do so. Way (2003: 454) notes that Moldova did not become the most democratic of the post-Soviet countries apart from the Baltics because it had a strong civil society or democratic and liberal political representatives, but because it was too weak to maintain the authoritarian regime. Way calls this situation "failed authoritarianism". We could interpret the situation in Abkhazia in 2002–2004 similarly. The bad economic situation and international isolation weakened the Abkhazian leaders to the extent that they did not have the power to keep the then relatively authoritarian system in operation. This relative weakness we call link number three.

The fourth link was forged by the new political elite who that came to power in 2004. Under the above mentioned circumstances they launched the democratisation-for-recognition strategy. It seems that they, at first, considered internal democratisation and liberalisation as a continuation of the struggle for national independence; however, soon they started to understand the democratisation process as a condition for international recognition of Abkhazia's independence. In this logic, Abkhazian politicians started to compare in their official declarations the level of democracy in their country not with the one in Georgia, but rather with the level of democracy in Kosovo. The President of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh, declared in 2006 that "if Kosovo is recognised, Abkhazia will be recognised in the course of three days. I am absolutely sure of that" (Popescu, 2007: 18). In another interview Bagapsh commented on the point that Abkhazia "has more reasons to be independent than Kosovo because Abkhazia functions better than Kosovo, which is governed by the UN" (Popescu 2007: 18).

Importantly, it was not only politicians, but also wider public in Abkhazia, who shared the idea of country's democratisation. It clearly followed from the discussion with representatives of the civil society, whom we had an opportunity to communicate with in Sukhumi in October 2009, that democracy was then perceived even outside political circles in Abkhazia as a strong plus in the struggle for international recognition. Only two of the journalists present mentioned the problems of the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia as a game of power between the West and Russia in which Abkhazia plays the role of a hostage and cannot influence its position at all. All the other respondents (9), whether they were academics, students or civil sector representatives, were convinced that if democratisation of Abkhazia continues and the economic situation improves, Abkhazia simply deserves international recognition.

8. Factors preventing democratisation

In the first decade of Abkhazia's contested independence, the legitimacy of its ruling elite was based on the victorious war against Georgian armed

units. As well as in other de facto states, the halo of war heroes guaranteed politicians sufficient authority necessary for ruling. Their effort was to maintain national unity which was manifested in the homogeneity of national interests. Plurality of opinions on future development was understood as splitting the already lowly-populated nation. The effort to prevent plurality of opinions is one of the reasons why unrecognised states were mentioned as not free countries in scholarly texts in the 1990s (King, 2001; Lynch, 2004).

Whereas these restrictions on plurality of opinions have been overcome, as we have already mentioned in the previous chapter, it was the attitude of the USA and the EU that became an unexpected hurdle to democratisation in de facto states. In fully internationally recognised states the USA and the EU support transformation of authoritarian or post-totalitarian regimes to liberal democracies through generous programmes focusing on democratic institutions, the rule of law and independent media. Unrecognised states do not receive similar support. The only exception to this rule is Abkhazia, which started drawing limited amounts of financial sources from the EC Programme of Decentralised Co-Operation in 2007 (10).

Moreover, during the past eight years since the recognition of Kosovo's independence, Abkhazian politicians have become obviously frustrated from the attitude of the EU and the USA to the question of international recognition. Sergei Shamba, Abkhazian foreign minister in 1997–2010 and prime minister in 2010–2011, has criticised the double-standards in the attitude of western countries to Kosovo and Abkhazia since 2008. Maxim Gvindzhia, Shamba's successor in the position of foreign minister, continued in this rhetoric. He, for example, responded to the interview of Hillary Clinton for Russian state TV on 23 March 2010. In this interview the US Secretary of State defended the right of Kosovo to independence on the basis of the fact that the status of Kosovo was violently suppressed in the 20th century, whereas Georgia was a united country without internal conflicts, and thus the territorial integrity of Georgia is supported by American diplomacy at present. According to Gvindzhia, such declarations show that "some politicians' attempts to ignore all historic and legal grounds of the Abkhaz statehood are the continuation of the

double-standard policy and are not justified either legally or historically" (Abkhaz World, 2010).

The Western stance towards Abkhazian independence has an impact on Abkhazian attitude towards democracy. Whereas in 2009 we witnessed an enthusiasm in democracy building and many respondents shared their prospects for establishing of positive relations with the Western countries, the situation changed dramatically in 2014. That year our respondents were still very proud of the gradual democratisation of Abkhazia (11), nevertheless, they concurred that a strategy based on emphasising Abkhazia's democratic nature was not used in an attempt to gain international recognition. According to an Abkhazian journalist, "this strategy had been used before Russia recognised ... [Abkhazia's] independence, and thanks to inertia also few years after that" (12). An academic from Abkhazia said: "Approximately up to 2010 our diplomats attempted to create good relations with both Russia and the West. Russia's recognition of our independence meant a lot to us, but unfortunately it marked an end to the possibility of cooperation with the West. Since 2011 or 2012 it has been clear that the USA and the EU member states have no interest in deeper relations with Abkhazia. And so, in my opinion, the need for democracy is generally mentioned purely for a domestic audience" (13). The member of the Abkhazian Parliament perceives the West's abandonment of attempts to cooperate with Abkhazia in last few years as a result of ideological and geopolitical factors: "The fact that we have good relations with Russia necessarily means that we have poor relations with the EU and the USA. That's realpolitik" (14). To sum it up, there has been a visible turn away from the "multi-vector" policy through which Abkhazian representatives previously sought to focus simultaneously on Russia and the West toward expressed necessity of stronger orientation towards Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. In consequence, 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.

The fact of international non-recognition substantially limits the capabilities of de facto states to establish relations with internationally recognised states, international organisations, etc., isolating de facto states from international system. This isolation forc-

es de facto states to rely on so-called patron states, which protect their interests on the international scene. In exchange for the necessary economic, political, and military support from the patron state, politicians in de facto states have to be loyal to the interests of the respective patron state. Such a fact limits the autonomy of the country's decision-making process, and responsibility of politicians of de facto states to their voters (Caspersen, 2009: 50–51).

Abkhazia's patron state is Russia. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Russia has been using Abkhazian separatism as a tool for influencing Georgian politics (Cornell, 2001: 344–353). Russia military supported Abkhazian armed units in the war of independence in the first half of 1990s and it was Russia who brokered a ceasefire in October 1993, which eventually led to the signing of a peace treaty in April 1994 (Cornell, 2001: 170–174). In 2008, Georgia had the opportunity to see that the Russian support of Abkhazia and South Ossetia does not end with silent economic support, but that Russia would not hesitate to deploy its own army for their protection. In 2010 the Abkhazian budget spent USD 9.8 million for army expenses; however, the Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, promised Abkhazia military aid at the rate of USD 465 million for the same year. This is an amount three times higher than the whole Abkhazian state budget in the respective year (ICG, 2010: 3–5).

Abkhazia is dependent on Russia not only militarily and politically, but also economically. The high degree of international isolation caused by the unsettled political status of Abkhazia has meant a significant reduction of income from foreign investments, limitation of the possibility to export goods to foreign markets, a low rate of development aid and zero loans from international financial institutions (15). In 2010, 49% of the Abkhazian state budget was covered by direct support from the Russian Federation. It ranged from USD 61–67 million in the following years, which was about 22% of the official Abkhazian budget. However, if we add the amount of USD 163 million to that amount, which was released for the Comprehensive Aid Plan for Infrastructure Development in 2011 and 2012, the actual subsidy amounted to at least 70% of Abkhazia's budget (ICG, 2013: 6). In 2013 and 2014 a total of 40–50% of the national budget was financed directly by the Russian Federation (16).

More than 90% of the inhabitants of Abkhazia hold Russian citizenship (Artman 2013, 683–684). This is because the passport of the Russian Federation not only enables travelling out of Abkhazia, but also entitles to unemployment benefits and pension payments from the Russian state budget. Such guarantees of security and economic aid, without which the functioning of Abkhazia could hardly be maintained, certainly impact the level of dependence on the patron state (17).

After the ousting of President Ankvab, Abkhazia's dependence on Russia raises a question if it becomes even more integrated with the Russian Federation. Although all our respondents in the 2014 field research were clear supporters of Abkhazian independence, when asked directly whether there were any Abkhazian politicians who would be willing to agree to the country's entering into an association with Russia (as an associated state), they all agreed that this was currently a highly sensitive topic. In this sense the representative of the Public Chamber of Abkhazia stated: Former President Ankvab was against the association with Russia, but I could not say he would be anti-Russian because such an attitude is completely impossible in Abkhazia. It is questionable as far we can go in integration with Russia. Russia is the guarantor of our security, economic development and social stability. Of course there are politicians, for example Sergei Shamba, who promote even closer relations with Russia, but nobody knows exactly what that means" (18).

Though Russian Federation is the most important partner for Abkhazia in all major areas, it is not always viewed in a purely positive light. Such opinions are relatively rare, however, one of them clearly illustrates fears of the negative influence Russia has on Abkhazian democracy. A representative of the Abkhazian non-profit sector said: "I am afraid of the growing influence of Russia in Abkhazia from the perspective of the threat to civil liberties and democratic values. I have information that Russia has on many occasions pressured our political representatives to enact a law on foreign agents. If this law was passed, it would represent a similar obstacle to the freedom of our civil society as it does in Russia" (19).

Another hurdle in the democratisation of de facto states is the rights of national minorities. Eth-

nicity played an important role in Abkhazia at the escalation of the conflict and the Abkhazians still refuse to allow a return of a larger number of refugees. They are also not able to guarantee the equal rights both to those who have spontaneously returned and to the majority population. The Georgians who were the majority in Abkhazia before the war and according to the official census in 2011 formed more than 19% of the inhabitants of Abkhazia, have a single representative in the 35-seat Abkhazian Parliament after the election in 2012, the Armenians (17.4% of the population of Abkhazia) have three representatives. The remaining 31 seats (89% of mandates) are occupied by ethnic Abkhazians who only form 50.8% of population of Abkhazia (Ethno-Kavkaz, 2013; DFWATCH, 2012). There was a very similar situation in the Abkhazian Parliament in 2002–2007, when the Abkhazians had 32 mandates, the Georgians were not represented at all and the Russians and the Armenians had three mandates together. Ethnic minorities had the highest representation in the Abkhazian Parliament of 2007–2012, when the Armenians and the Russians equally had three mandates, and the Georgian community had two representatives; the Turkish minority, which only forms 0.3 % of Abkhazian population, was represented by one member during 2007–2012. Despite this varied composition, the remaining 26 seats (74% of mandates) were held by Abkhazians (Ó Beacháin, 2012: 173). There is a very similar situation in all other key positions in the country.

Another example of ethnically exclusive national project appeared in July 2014, when nearly 23,000 residents of Gali district (the vast majority of them ethnic Georgians) were deleted from the electoral register and thus could not vote in the subsequent presidential elections. Such a situation, when equal opportunities in access to national institutions only pertain to members of a single ethnic group and are refused to others based on nationality is called either ethnocracy (Smootha, 1997) or exclusive democracy. The latter one is, according to Merkel's (2004) conceptual scheme, one of four possible defects of democratic regime, a reduced democratic sub-type violating one of the basic characteristics of democracy – the political equality of citizens regardless their ethnic origin.

9. Conclusion

Besides the fact that the literature on de facto states mentions the democratisation-for-recognition strategy as a choice of more de facto states, the only empirically measurable democratisation that can be at least in part attributed to this strategy has appeared in Abkhazia. The democratisation in Abkhazia seems to result from a combination of four factors. Moreover, it seems these factors have positive effect on democratisation only if they work together. Metaphorically, they are like links in a chain which falls apart when one link is broken. These links are identified as (1) relatively long duration of Abkhazian contested independence which has brought certain stability and overcome the idea of the unity of opinions, which used to be perceived as a *conditio sine qua non* for sustaining Abkhazia's independence vis-à-vis potential Georgian aggression; (2) emergence of political opposition and critical civil society; (3) relatively weak state institutions which prevented Abkhazia from being too authoritarian; and (4) conscious democratisation efforts not only of the new reform-minded political elite, but of a sizeable portion of the Abkhazian public.

However, the democratisation process in Abkhazia seems to be limited by two factors. The most important factor is the influence of external players, above all Russia as Abkhazia's patron state, and the West as potential Abkhazia's partner. The unwillingness of the West to recognise Abkhazia's independence led to its even more profound orientation to Moscow. Regarding the fact that Russia is not a democratic country, it is highly unlikely that its influence could lead to the further democratisation of its petty protégé. The second factor limiting the quality of Abkhazia's democracy dwells in the ethnically exclusive project of Abkhazian statehood, which will always necessarily result in a so-called exclusive democracy, where political dominance of the "titular" ethnic group is preserved.

There are, however, several questions which remain unanswered. First, the whole project of Abkhazia's democratisation is endangered by the resignation on the democratisation-for-recognition strategy. Will Abkhazian political elite as well as the wider public sphere gather motivation strong enough to continue in democratising and liberal-

ising efforts when the crucial goal – the recognition of independence from the democratic Western states – has simply faded away? Second, the role of Russia as Abkhazia's patron state will probably increase as Moscow continues to support Abkhazia militarily, politically, and economically. Will Abkhazia be able to preserve its level of democracy vis-à-vis probable Russian pressure on a closer association or even integration with Abkhazia's northern neighbour? A factor that can possibly make chances for preserving or even boosting Abkhazia's democracy is the full incorporation of the ethnically Georgian population in the southern districts of the country into the Abkhazian polity. This population can balance the Russian pressure by voting for politicians who are less willing to fully subordinate to Moscow. However, it seems that recent disenfranchisement of the ethnically Georgian population by the then acting president Khadjimba dashes hopes for dismantling the ethnic exclusivity of the Abkhazian statehood.

It seems that factors hindering Abkhazia's democratisation have better chances than those supporting it. However, even if Abkhazia's attempt for democratisation crashes, there are still many lessons to be drawn. First, relatively small area and population of (most of) the de facto states may result in the sense of community, which can support the development of civil society capable of criticising political malpractice that is difficult to hide in a tiny isolated polity. The hope of international recognition or at least constructive relations with the Western democracies has a noticeable impact on internal political actors' behaviour and their positive stance towards democratisation. However, if the Western democracies are not willing to endanger their political and economic relations with the countries from which the individual de facto states have separated in exchange for the recognition of those separatist entities, the support for internal democratisation in de facto states most likely proves fruitless. Without having Western democracies as their patrons, paving the way to the international community, de facto states have to turn to their traditional patrons – that is, most frequently, Russia – from which the support for democratisation can hardly come. Thus, the only two factors which can always drive democratisation in de facto states are the sense of community and the relative weakness of state institutions

which do not allow the ruling parties to fully suppress the opposition.

Notes

- (1) Interview with Ashot Ghulyan, Speaker of the Parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh, October 2009.
- (2) In 2011 Abkhazia's independence was also internationally recognized by two Pacific states, Vanuatu and Tuvalu. However, both states subsequently withdrew their recognition of Abkhazia when they signed a treaty establishing diplomatic and consular relations with Georgia. Vanuatu did so in 2013, Tuvalu in 2014.
- (3) The last widely accepted official census in Abkhazia took place in 1989, when the region was inhabited by 525,000 people. A census taken in 2003 indicated that the population of Abkhazia was 214,000 people. The last census in Abkhazia was in 2011, showing a population of 240,705 inhabitants, of whom 50.8% are Abkhazians, 19.3% Georgians, 17.4% Armenians and 9.17% Russians. Some authors consider the number of Abkhazians to be overestimated. For more details see Ethno-Kavkaz, 2013.
- (4) For more on the Abkhazian conflict and its consequences see, e.g., Chirikba, 2009 or Souleimanov, 2013.
- (5) Interview with a representative of NGO sector, Sukhumi, June 2014.
- (6) Interview with a representative of NGO sector, Sukhumi, June 2014 and the interview with an Abkhazian journalist, Sukhumi, June 2014.
- (7) Interview with a member of the Abkhazian Parliament, Sukhumi, October 2009.
- (8) Interview with a journalist, Sukhumi, October 2009.
- (9) Interview with an academic from the Abkhazian State University, a representative of the Abkhazian NGO sector and discussion with students of Abkhazian State University Sukhumi, October 2009.
- (10) Further information on the programmes of the European Commission in Abkhazia – see EU Delegation to Georgia, 2010.

- (11) All respondents concurred that the degree of democracy in Abkhazian society has remained relatively constant over the past ten years, or has increased slightly. Negative opinions in this regard were expressed by one of the Members of Parliament, a journalist, an academic, and a representative of the non-profit sector when discussing the ethnically exclusivist project of the Abkhazian state, as part of which many politicians and public figures are attempting to deny ethnic Georgians the right to vote and preventing them from becoming legitimate participants in the Abkhazian state.
- (12) Interview with a journalist, Sukhumi, June 2014.
- (13) Interview with an academic from the Abkhazian State University, Sukhumi, July 2014.
- (14) Interview with a member of the Abkhazian Parliament, Sukhumi, June 2014.
- (15) Interview with a representative of NGO sector, Sukhumi, October 2009.
- (16) Interview with the member of the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sukhumi, June 2014.
- (17) Interview with a journalist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, October 2009.
- (18) Interview with the representative of the Public Chamber of Abkhazia, Sukhumi, June 2014.
- (19) Interview with a representative of NGO sector, Sukhumi, June 2014.

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