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*Between sustainability and uncertainty. Political systems of
Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic
– conditions and features*

ABSTRACT

The article revisits the issue of the political functionality and social organization in Caucasian *de facto* entities. Basing on theoretical approaches regarding the phenomenon of unrecognized states, the paper examines cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) with the focus on internal and external factors, including historical legacy, system of power, weakness of the mother state as well as support of the metropolitan state. It concludes that *de facto* entities demonstrate the vitality of their societies and political maturity, but their future depends mostly on international politics.

Key words: *de facto* entities, politics of the South Caucasus, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh Republic

In the scientific literature, the issue of unrecognized post-Soviet states (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and Transnistria) is generally presented in the context of international politics and geopolitical rivalry in the region [Pegg 1998; Lynch 2002; Iwańczuk & Kapuśniak 2008; Caspersen 2011]. In this approach, researchers are not focused on the problem of state-building, the development of the political systems or the domestic policy of post-Soviet *de facto* entities [Broers 2005; Markedonov 2008]. However, two decades of their efficient functioning makes it possible to generalize and describe the main features of their political development. Since 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been partially recognized states. They

are recognized by only a few members of the United Nations, including Nicaragua and Nauru, which makes this recognition disputable. Nevertheless, formal recognition and the considerable political support of the Russian Federation are important achievements for both republics. Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria belong to the category of *de facto* states: they possess *suspended* sovereignty and have successfully launched the process of state-building but are not recognized by any UN member. In some negotiations they are considered as independent parties to the conflicts [Markedonov 2012b: 20–25].

This paper is devoted to the political systems of Caucasian *de facto* entities, that despite individual specificity present many common features, such as regularities in the development of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh after the announcement of independence in the early 1990s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, *de facto* and fully recognized post-Soviet states faced the same problems of political transformation. The main difference and determinant of the development of *de facto* entities was a lack of full recognition. As will be proved in this paper, that fact was not an obstacle in the formation of relatively stable and effective political systems. According to Pal Kolstø's theoretical research that since *de facto* entities are not supported by international recognition, they must be sustained by internal factors [Kolstø 2006: 723–740], the following paper examines various aspects of the political systems of Caucasian *de facto* entities: external conditions (the impact of the international environment on the *de facto* states), internal conditions (e.g., the social background of the political systems) and main features of political systems (the systems of power).

INTERNATIONAL FACTOR: WEAKNESS OF MOTHER STATE

Abkhazian, South Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh separatism exploited when the Soviet Union was liberalizing its political life. Thus, they enjoyed the same conditions of *perestroika* as Georgian and Azerbaijani separatism. Post-Soviet national movements developed according to a similar scenario, thereby the starting point for establishing independent states in Georgia or Abkhazia in 1990–1991 was almost the same. One can notice that contemporary Caucasian states and unrecognized entities developed separately. Since the beginning of their existence, *de facto* states have not had any legal ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan.

All military attempts made by Tbilisi and Baku to ensure the integrity of the state have failed. Defeats in wars were evidence of ineffectiveness of the policy towards disputed territories. Although within Georgia's and Azerbaijan's budgets, expenses on military affairs are much bigger than the budgets of *de facto* states, the next potential confrontation would not be successful for Tbilisi or Baku. Unrecognized states are recompensing their infrastructural and financial shortcomings with determination and support from metropolises. The lack of effective international support for long-

term conflict settlement, as well as the lack of influential patrons contribute to the weakness of both Georgia and Azerbaijan.

For citizens and elites of the *de facto* entities, Georgia and Azerbaijan are not interesting alternatives to statehood. Noticeable nationalist moods exist in both republics, which make it hard to imagine the peaceful coexistence of antagonized nations. Georgian and Azerbaijani authorities have done nothing to increase the attraction of their countries to the secessionist territories. There is no non-ethnic understanding of nation and the dividing line of 'us' and 'them' remains strong [Splidsboel 2009: 5].

In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were heavily destroyed during wars, the potential of Georgian economy could play a big role. Although Georgia has enjoyed market growth since 2003, widespread poverty (affecting 28% of society), a high level of unemployment and the collapse of agriculture are still big problems [Lynch 2004: 165]. Georgia cannot offer Abkhazians and Ossetians a social service competitive to Russia's, which for many families is the main source of income. In the case of the NKR, the factor that alienates Armenians from Azerbaijan is not economy (Azerbaijan is the leader of the region in this matter), but an extremely difficult historical background as well as cultural and confessional differences.

In a certain way the unattractiveness of the mother states is caused by the character of their political regimes. The level of civil liberties and political rights in Abkhazia and the NKR is higher than in Azerbaijan, which is stagnating in authoritarianism. Thus, due to the problems with establishing democratic institutions and procedures, Georgia's and Azerbaijan's political systems are not attractive for the societies of unrecognized states.

INTERNATIONAL FACTOR: METROPOLITAN STATES SUPPORT

Caucasian *de facto* states enjoy support from metropolitan states and are heavily dependent on them. Russia's involvement in the separatist conflict can be explained in the context of the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus region. Therefore, Russia's support and protection of Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be treated as a function of Kremlin's global and regional policy. Russia would probably not be engaged in separatist movements if the Caucasus was not one of the regions of hottest global rivalry.

Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia started at the beginning of the 1990s and was a result of the international society's decision not to send joint peace forces to these areas. In consequence, Russia was the only country that took responsibility for maintaining the ceasefire. The exacerbation of Russia-Georgia relations since the beginning of the 21st century has been effected by Russia's hidden policy of supporting separatism. Evidence of this was the support for Sukhumi and Tskhinvali during the 5-day war in 2008, but the support has roots in Kremlin's willingness to control the South Caucasus and fits *The Strategy of the National Security*

of the Russian Federation [Malashenko 2000: 34–47]. Multidimensional support for both unrecognized republics aims to ensure the security of Russia.

Russia maintains influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia using various tools: besides formal and informal political and military support, Moscow develops the dependence of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's societies and elites with Russia's help. Its institutional assistance (especially to South Ossetia) is a kind of 'outsourcing' [Popescu 2006: 1]. This assistance covers internal matters and state security and consists of taking control in these issues by approved persons.¹ Russian financial support aims to make the *de facto* states conditional, Russian business tries 'to purchase' their infrastructure, economies. Restorations of war damages are taking place on Russian loans that will be difficult to repay [Kazin 2009: 139]. This means that in the long-term perspective, Russia's patronage will have negative consequences for the *de facto* states and could destabilize their political systems [Markedonov 2012a: 189–194].

The role of Armenia in the domestic polity of the NKR is quite different. In this case one can talk about specific mutual ties between Armenia and the NKR. Both states have created one space of Armenian *ethnos* and can be almost considered as one country [Minasyan 2011: 142–151]. Contemporary Armenia's political elites, who arose during the Karabakh conflict, constructed Armenia's political scene for many years. The purposeful lack of recognition of the NKR by Armenia does not reflect on the close cooperation and the absolute support for Stepanakert. Armenia's authorities support the NKR diplomatically, militarily and economically. Armenia's funds make up a big part of the NKR budget and donations by the Armenian diaspora play an important role in state income.

Russia's involvement with the NKR is relatively weak. The 'frozen conflict' over Karabakh is in Russia's favour since it allows Russia to keep influence in the region through an alliance with Armenia, a member of the Collective Treaty Organization and a future member of the Eurasian Customs Union. Accession to the latter organization would destroy the integrity of Armenia and the NKR and would push the NKR into full isolation.

JUSTIFICATION OF SEPARATISM: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION

In order to justify separatist tendencies and striving for their own states, the nations of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh use historical arguments. All three republics point to the tradition of national self-organization (especially Abkhazia), emphasizing the length of time of possession of disputed territories. History is used

¹ For instance, the Prime Minister of Abkhazia Nodar Khashba; the Minister of Defence of Abkhazia Sultan Sosnaliev, the Prime Ministers of South Ossetia Aslanbek Bulatsev and Vadim Brovtsev were related to Russia.

as a tool that legitimizes contemporary secessionist tendencies, the existence of *de facto* states as well as Georgian and Azerbaijani claims to these territories. Historical statehoods are inseparably related to the national rhetoric that in the early 1990s was used by former communist elites, *nomenklatura*, as an expedient tool to preserve their privileged political status. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, former party leaders have maintained a predominant impact on the political development of the *de facto* states. Moreover, at the early stage of the struggle for independence, the political elites of both separatist entities demonstrated resistance against unpredicted consequences of changes in *perestroika* and disintegration tendencies. In fact, Abkhazian and South Ossetian elites sought Kremlin's support against the new Georgian authorities headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Formal loyalty to the Soviet central government was rather a trick; a tactical move aimed against Georgian attempts to leave the Soviet Union and eliminate autonomous regions within Georgia [Markedonov 2012b: 55–64].

After the dissolution of the USSR in late 1991, all three separatist entities justified secession from Georgia and Azerbaijan through international law and the right to self-determination. Using moral and legal arguments, unrecognized authorities claimed the secessions were the result of ethnic discrimination experienced under Georgian and Azerbaijani power. In all *de facto* states referendums were held that confirmed common support for separatism.² The international community as well as the authorities of both republics which were threatened by separatism did not recognize the results of referendums and the right to self-determination, pointing to the right to territorial integrity. Thereby, Georgia and Azerbaijan, newly independent states that had emerged after the collapse of the USSR and had declared self-determination, refused this right to their own autonomous territories. The refusal of autonomy for Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was considered in Tbilisi and Baku as the solution to ethnic and territorial conflicts [Cornell 2001; de Waal 2003]. The legal collision that is impossible to overcome means that both *de facto* and fully recognized states can find arguments in their favour. To conclude, in the light of history and international law, *de facto* states find justification for their struggle for independence.

SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENCE, NARROW POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND HIGH LEVEL OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Historical and ethnopolitical circumstances were the main reasons behind separatist activities in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the NKR. Based on the supremacy of the national idea, the nations of the three *de facto* states were convinced that

² South Ossetia and the NKR organized their own referendums in independence while Abkhazia (then the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic), on the contrary to Georgia, took part in the referendum on a new union treaty, organized by Soviet central authorities.

separation from Georgia and Azerbaijan was necessary. In order to save their own ethnic identity, the societies of the unrecognized states were determined to pay huge costs for military campaigns, destroying economic ties [Markedonov 2005]. These activities have led to the petrification of unrecognized political entities that have all the attributes of a state and are recognized by their residents. Caucasian *de facto* states are not temporary rogue *black spots* that do not need a constitution, legitimation of power and foreign relations, but well organized formal social structures that strive for the fulfilment of social demands, including state sovereignty.

It is noticeable that Caucasian *de facto* states present high levels of self-determination (the lowest is in South Ossetia) [Czachor 2014b: 50–58]. Formally, all these entities are unitary states with a presidential system of government and legislative, executive and judicial branches of power. All three republics have adopted constitutions that declared a ‘rule-of-law based state’, principles of democracy, human rights, tough (according to specificity of the Caucasus) social and political relations based on clan-corporation and patrimonialism [Kazin 2009: 134–138; Hale 2015: 199–205, 212–220, 289–302]. In the case of Abkhazia, where there are still big communities of national minorities, the political system is a kind of ethnocracy. The evidence of this is that, according to the constitution, only a person with Abkhazian nationality can be elected as the president of this republic.

The complicated relations between the nations struggling for independence and the states that claim authority over their territory seriously affect the prospects of a dialogue and mutual trust. Considerable parts of *de facto* entities’ peoples are victimized persons that “cannot forget or forgive” [Clogg 2008: 305–329]. Although it is hard to imagine at the level of interethnic relations, the consequences of eventual reunification of the *de facto* states with Georgia and Azerbaijan are ensuring that Abkhazian, South Ossetian and the NKR authorities continue efforts for international recognition and the idea of sovereignty has no alternative. There are no parties or politicians that are calling for the incorporation of *de facto* states into the mother states. Such an attitude would be treated as the harshest crime against these states.

In some sense for Abkhazians and Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians the current political *status quo* is acceptable. The independence declared by their governments, although unrecognized by the international community, meets national aspirations and the close ties with the metropolitan states ensure a relatively high level of security and, at the same time, do not impede internal relations. In the case of South Ossetia, the authorities are formally applying for the union with North Ossetia within the Russian Federation but current close relations with North Ossetia and big support from the Russian budget satisfy the political elites in Tskhinvali. Hence, for the societies and politicians of *de facto* states there is no alternative to continuing efforts for international recognition and strengthening political systems.³

³ The only exception is South Ossetia, where there are no tendencies to develop a separate South Ossetian nation.

On the other hand, consolidation around the idea of independence is reflected in the political discourse in the *de facto* states. The absolutization of sovereignty in the condition of unsettled conflict and the uncertain status of the state distinctly limits political discourse and affects all political actors. For instance, in the parliamentary elections in the NKR in 2010, the programmes of the political parties were similar, and in 2012, Bako Sahakyan, who was striving for re-election, was also supported by the opposition. Similar situation was during elections in Abkhazia [O'Bojhin 2014: 138–141]. Due to the attention paid to independence by all political parties, differences in their programmes are not big. In the elections, voters choose the politicians they know. A significant impact on the political culture of *de facto* states is made by the small number of inhabitants. It means inhabitants have a bigger social control over politicians and their responsibility to the voters.

Thus, the supremacy of the idea of independence is the main factor that consolidates societies of unrecognized states and is the source of popular mobilization. Abkhazians, South Ossetians and NKR Armenians are aware that a weakening involvement in defence of political achievements might have serious consequences: the possible resumption of warfare with Georgia and Azerbaijan would carry a fatality threat for *de facto* states and the subsistence of their nations. Because of that, the political systems and whole socio-political life of the NKR, a large part of South Ossetia and part of Abkhazia is close to 'military regime'. This means there is a strong, predominant position of the president in the political system and a centralization of power with a key role for military officers (*siloviki*) and former officers, who occupy the main positions in the state. Such a 'military regime' is accompanied by the acceptance of a well-organized society.

The big threat of losing their own states makes the nations of *de facto* entities more engaged in political life. Their appreciation of independence is reflected in participation in elections. The turnout in the last election was not lower than 71% (except in the Abkhazian parliamentary election in 2012). The idea of independence and the political practice of over the last 20 years is consolidating nations. A big positive impact on the political systems of the unrecognized republics is made by a low level of social cleavage.

Due to specificity of the Caucasian societies, class cleavage can be substituted by clan cleavage. In the case of *de facto* states it plays the biggest role in Abkhazia, where political life is shaped by rivalry between Gudauta and Ochamchira clans [Kazin 2009: 136]. Despite some unrest, which is evidence of this cleavage, since 2004 up until the summer of 2014, the political *status quo* has not been breached. In the two other republics, the role of clan cleavage is smaller. In the case of South Ossetia, clan cleavage was considered to be between Eduard Kokoity's clan and single smaller groups that were competing with him. In the NKR, this cleavage is essentially absent. Due to the historical background and strong local identity the whole society of the NKR may be treated as one clan.

Because of the relative ethnic homogeneity and marginalization of Georgians in the social life of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, confessional and ethnic cleavages play

a moderate role in these states. In the case of the NKR, where in the late 1980s to early 1990s, more drastic changes in ethnic structure took place and all Azerbaijanis left the territory or died in fights, the NKR is currently ethnically, culturally and confessionally homogenous. Due to the small territory of *de facto* states, a predominantly agrarian economy and the lack of large urban areas, centre vs. periphery cleavage does not play an important role. In the Abkhazian and South Ossetian countryside, there are still single Georgian enclaves, but their capacity to destabilize the political systems is restrained.

Comparing social cleavages in Georgia and Azerbaijan to those in *de facto* states, it seems to be evident that due to the bigger number of inhabitants and a larger ethnic and cultural diversity, they play a greater role in these fully recognized states. Generally, societies of *de facto* states are ethnically, culturally and confessionally homogenous and small. Thanks to that they are well-knit, invulnerable to external pressure and ready to defend their own interests [Czachor 2014a: 387–389].

It is important to note that strong executive power and a high level of popular mobilization for ‘military regimes’ does not interfere with the pluralism of political life. Despite all Caucasian *de facto* entities are witnessing authoritarian tendencies, there are often so many alternations of rulers and competitive elections that the result is hard to predict. In all unrecognized Caucasian republics, elections are accompanied by a struggle between political opponents. There have also been serious constitutional crises that have been overcome by constructive methods, without breaching the political system.

DOMINATION OF THE PRESIDENT IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEMS

The lack of international recognition is the main factor that makes the political systems of *de facto* entities different from the systems of other states in the Caucasus region. Unsettled conflicts and ineffective peace processes coordinated by the international society are the main external threats to *de facto* states. As a result, the political systems are influenced by ‘military regime’. This situation is reflected in the system of power: the strong position of the president among other institutions, the centralization of power and also the high level of popular mobilization.

All Caucasian *de facto* entities have adopted systems of power with a predominant position of the president. The strongest presidency has emerged in South Ossetia. When Eduard Kokoity was in power there was a strong tendency to extend his rights, giving him domination over the state. The Presidential Administration was particularly well developed. In this matter, South Ossetia’s authorities were following the example of Vladimir Putin’s Russia. The office of the vice president makes the Abkhazian system of power similar to the Georgian one before 2004. In contemporary Abkhazia, the vice president, as well as the government, has very limited competences. The system of power in the NKR is similar to the Armenian one and is based on French semi-presidentialism [Czachor 2014a: 321].

Due to typological difficulties in defining political regimes, their nature is determined by the power of the main political institutions: the president, the parliament and the government. In the scientific literature, there are various concepts of measuring the power of political institutions [Frye 1997: 523–549; Metcalf 2000: 660–685; Fish 2006: 5–20; Antoszewski 2010: 43–44]. Using these methods one can notice that:

- the position in the system of power of the presidents of *de facto* entities and fully recognized Caucasian states is similar and dominant over other institutions. They are the heads of states and exercise executive power;
- strong presidencies are accompanied by relatively weak parliaments and governments;
- to provide policy, the presidents do not need the support of the parliamentary majority. The presidents' legitimations of power are based on nationwide elections and the support of the citizens;
- parliaments of *de facto* states do not have developed control rights towards the presidents and the governments;
- the power of the parliaments is impaired by the presidents' legislative rights and the right to veto acts produced by the parliaments;
- the governments have limited rights and fully depend on the presidents;
- in the light of that, 'military regimes' of *de facto* states are based not on the system of institutions but on personal factors and the staffing of main state offices;
- the constitutions of each *de facto* entity recognize local self-government as an initial level of self-determination. In practice, local self-government effectively works only in the NKR, while in South Ossetia it is only just becoming established.

The cases of post-Soviet political transformations suggest that a president equipped with broad competences is reflected in the limiting of democratization [Fish 2006: 5–20]. What is worth pointing out is that strong presidential power in *de facto* entities does not disturb the development of political life. In all three unrecognized republics, one can observe elite turnovers and competitive elections that lead to the shifting of power. Rivalry and the political struggle for votes are typical for these republics. There have even been serious constitutional crises that were overcome by local societies in a better way than in many other post-Soviet states.

TRANSITION FROM STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE TO THE CIVIL RULE OF LAW

After the period of forceful wars for independence and temporary ceasefires (Abkhazia and South Ossetia in June 1992, the NKR in May 1994) the unrecognized republics started the process of civil statebuilding [King 2001: 524–552]. They adopted democratic constitutions that guarantee human and civil rights and respect the principle of the separation of powers. Civil governments and political pluralism

are evidence of the common support of the nations for the idea of independence as well as the success of the institutionalization of the *de facto* states.

The constitution of Abkhazia was adopted by the parliament in November 1994 (in 1990 Abkhazia restored the former Soviet constitution of 1925). The parliament elected Vladislav Ardzinba, the speaker of the Supreme Council and 'founding father' of contemporary Abkhazia, as president. Due to this, the clan that had been ruling since 1990 remained in power and got new legitimation under the new constitution. The first nationwide election of the parliament was held in 1999 at the same time as a referendum on the constitution. The only candidate was incumbent President Ardzinba; he got almost 99% of the votes.

South Ossetia's parliament adopted their constitution in November 1993, introducing a parliamentary system. No new political institutions were created; the document aimed to settle the system of power after a long-term conflict between the head of the Parliament Torez Kulumbegov and the Prime Minister Oleg Teziev. Acceptable for all key political actors, the constitution was a tool that preserved the *status quo*. The next conflict was between the new speaker of the Parliament Lyudvig Chibirov and Prime Minister Vladislav Garabaev, and this accelerated work on a new constitution. It was worked out based on the Russian constitution and adopted in 1996. Chibirov was elected president and his power strengthened.

In the NKR, in the period of the most dramatic fights with Azerbaijan in August 1992, state power was taken by the State Defence Committee, headed by Robert Kocharian. After victorious military campaigns by Kocharian, the position of president was implemented into the political system of the republic. Kocharian was elected as President by the Parliament in December 1994. After that, Kocharian's people proceeded to civil administration. In November 1996, in a nationwide election, Kocharian was re-elected. The appointment of the Prime Minister of Armenia in March 1997 was evidence of the success of Kocharian's government. The legal aspects of the process of statebuilding do not play a predominant role in strengthening the political system as is shown through the example of the NKR, which until the end of 2006 lacked a constitution [Kolstø, Blakkisrud 2008: 483].

When civilian governments were petrified in all *de facto* states, party systems and NGOs were formed. Meanwhile, in political life (especially in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) one could notice two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, pluralism was developing well: there were independent media and legal parties that had their own representations in the parliament. On the other hand, authoritarian tendencies similar to those in other post-Soviet countries emerged: the president's attempts to control political parties and media and election manipulation. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, blatant attempts to keep power by the incumbent president's clan after elections were lost, which led to serious constitutional crises. These were overcome by constructive methods, which one can interpret as evidence of the political maturity of elites and the strength of the civic society that was opposed to injustice.

Shortly after the presidential elections in Abkhazia in 2004, supporters of Raul Khadjimba, who represented Ardzinba's clan, tried to destabilize the situation caused by his unexpected defeat to opposing politician Sergei Bagapsh. The conflict was dissolved by a repeat vote, where Bagapsh and Khadjimba were joint candidates (Bagapsh for president, Khadjimba for vice president). Despite later conflicts, the peaceful solution of the conflict was a turning point in the process of building a democratic society [Ó Beacháin 2012: 165–174].

In South Ossetia, the scenario of the crisis in 2011–2012 was similar to Abkhazia. The presidential candidate Anatoli Bibilov, who was supported by Kokoity's clan, was defeated by independent Alla Dzhioyeva. Pressures against the opposition and attempts to manipulate the results of the election did not benefit Kokoity's clan. In the repeat election Leonid Tibilov, who was supported by the opposition, won.

The mentioned conflicts were critical moments in the development of the political systems. Dissolutions of the crises opened the ways to internal reinforcement of political systems and stopped authoritarian tendencies. Unrecognized states witnessed precedents of shifting power towards the opposition, which is a rare phenomenon in the post-Soviet area. This situation is reflected in Freedom House rating that declares political systems of Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh as partly free and South Ossetia's as not free [Freedom in the World 2014].

CONCLUSIONS

Examination of three case studies of Caucasian unrecognized states shows that the most sustainable political systems are in the NKR and Abkhazia. The Abkhaz are probably the most determined to establish a permanent independent state [Kolstø, Blakkisrud 2008: 483–490]. The NKR is seeking its future as a united state with Armenia, while South Ossetia is regularly applying for unification with North Ossetia within the Russian Federation.

The presidential system of power makes *de facto* states relatively strong and effective, but on the other hand, political parties are not institutionalized and political life is dominated by informal, neopatrimonial relations. This is typical for young democracies but in the long term perspective it could impede the success of democratization. All elections in unrecognized entities are hotly contested and their results are often unpredictable. A high level of popular mobilization and social cohesion are factors that will further consolidate the political systems.

With their long and relatively sustainable existence, *de facto* entities demonstrate the vitality of their societies and their political maturity. Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the NKR meet almost all the criteria of a state (except for full recognition), and recognition only depends on the decisions of individual countries.

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