

**Interpreting Non-Recognition in
De Facto States Engagement:
The Case of Abkhazia's Foreign
Relations**

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Abstract

This research looks at how Abkhazia's political elites and foreign policy decision-makers in Russia, the EU, and the US, which engage with Abkhazia, interpret non-recognition and how this interpretation influences the formulation and implementation of their respective foreign policy objectives and strategies. Although there is an emerging literature on engagement this has tended to analyse it as a one-way interaction, while this research represents the first multi-sided account of foreign policy interaction of a *de facto* state. It focuses on a single case study of Abkhazia between October 1999 and November 2014.

Non-recognition has largely been taken *a priori* as a negative constraining factor. The great majority of scholarship on *de facto* states takes non-recognition for granted and views it in substantive rather than in relational terms. Focusing on meaning and interpretation of non-recognition by elites in *de facto* states as well as decision-makers in the patron state and other significant engagers, allows for a better understanding of the interactions between *de facto* states and other actors in the international community.

The research proceeds from a constructivist theoretical framework, claiming that non-recognition is ultimately what states (including *de facto* states) make of it. To capture both domestic and external dimensions, the concepts of ontological security and geopolitical role, respectively, are introduced. Methodologically, the data was gathered through process tracing and semi-structured elite interviews with policy elites and decision makers in Sukhum/i,¹ Tbilisi, Brussels, Moscow, and Washington D.C. The main finding of this research is that the internal situation in the *de facto* state and wider geopolitical considerations influence interpretations of non-recognition (by both recognised actors as well as the *de facto* state itself), which in turn shape interaction between *de facto* states and other actors.

¹ Bearing in mind that place names are subject to a political dispute between Abkhazians (who use Sukhum, Gal and Ochamchira/e) and Georgians (who use Sukhumi, Gali and Ochamchire), I opted for the most neutral version: Sukhum/i, Gal/i, and Ochamchire/a.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References. Minor parts of Chapter 4 and Chapter 7 are based on texts published by the author as chapters in the following edited volumes:

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Introduction

“[...] each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. They *recognise* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another.”
– Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1977, 49–67)

According to Jorge Luis Borges (1984, 29), “it only takes two facing mirrors to build a labyrinth”. He was wrong. It only takes one broken 17th century mirror. The world map is like the latter – composed of hundreds of shards of different sizes and shapes. These are like recognised states. Most shards have remained part of the mirror, but some have fallen on the floor. Where they used to be, now gapes a series of small black holes. These are like de facto states.² Shards of the mirror, but now on the floor and not recognised as part of the mirror. All shards are mirrors, the recognised states acting as mirrors to one another.³ The edges of the shards provide friction to each other, so that they stay part of the same mirror. They are co-dependent; if one shard breaks loose, the adjacent ones might fall too. In the same way recognition binds the states to each other and maintains the system itself. De facto states look like black holes in the mirror, but that is not what they are. They are shards, like all other shards but that for some reason⁴ they have found themselves on the floor. Often unseen unless the sun shines on them at an angle to produce a glare, they are more often noticed only when stepped on painfully by accident. They are small, but sharp. If we are willing to inspect them closely, we will find in them a reflection of the mirror, high up on the

² I use Caspersen's (2011, 337) definition of de facto states as “territories that have achieved de facto independence, often through warfare, and now control most of the area upon which they lay claim. They have demonstrated an aspiration for full de jure independence, but either have not gained international recognition or have, at most, been recognised by a few states.” These polities exhibit many trappings of statehood, but to this day remain largely unrecognised. Abkhazia has been de facto independent since the end of the 1992-3 war with Georgia. For much of its existence it has been unrecognised, but after the Russian-Georgian War of 2008, Russia formally recognised its independence with Nicaragua (2008), Venezuela (2009), Nauru (2009), and Syria (2018) following suit. Tuvalu and Vanuatu recognised Abkhazia on 2011 but later withdrew their recognition. It is not a member of the United Nations or any major international organisation.

³ I owe the metaphor to Broers (2013), who considered de facto states to be ‘mirrors to the world’.

⁴ The reason is the restrictive interpretation of self-determination, which is prevalent in the international community and heavily biased against secession and towards territorial integrity.

wall. They reflect the fragmented state of the mirror and the arbitrariness by which some shards have remained part of the mirror and others have fallen on the floor. De facto states are little mirrors that reflect the broken antique mirror that is the Westphalian system of sovereign states. This Borgesian labyrinth has remained standing despite all predictions of the demise of the state at the heyday of globalisation. In fact, as with Borges things are often the reverse of what they seem, this labyrinth, too, is an anti-labyrinth: it is much more difficult to find its entrance than to find its exit. The riddle of the labyrinth is not inside, but on its walls. The walls of recognition have proven to be as firm in supporting the structure internally as in denying entrance to the uninvited looking for an entrance. They are the same walls but seen differently, depending on where one is looking from. From the inside, they represent stability, predictability, order, and protection from the chaos of nature. From the outside, they are insurmountable barriers erected by unsympathetic residents to exclude those trapped outside and expose them to the elements.

However small or insignificant they may seem to be, de facto states continue to matter as anomalies and exceptions to the international system predominantly composed of sovereign nation-states. They are the exceptions that prove the rule and if we want to understand the rules of the international system, we need to understand the exceptions to them. The relevance of studying de facto states has further increased with such events as the recognition of Kosovo by over half of UN member states since 2008, the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the August War in the same year, the proclamation of independence of Crimea (since annexed by Russia), the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic in 2014 as part of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Four Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Catalan crisis⁵ in 2017-2018. By focusing on Abkhazia's interaction with Russia, the EU and the US, I hope to shed light on – and increase the understanding of – foreign policy interactions of de facto states in general and de facto states in the post-

⁵ Catalonia is not a de facto state (it has not achieved de facto independence and does not control the territory it lays claims on). Part of the population, however, has strong aspirations for a full de jure independence, which led to a constitutional crisis in 2017 when Spain denounced the referendum on the independence of Catalonia.

Soviet space in particular. The aim of this research is three-fold. Firstly, it aims to contribute to de facto states studies, both by unpacking recognition and presenting a multi-sided account of foreign policy interactions of a de facto state, and by bringing new empirical data to support it. Second, it aims to promote better understanding of these entities to inform policy discussions on how to deal with these entities in the belief that conflict resolution must be based on understanding not only the behaviours, but also the views, perceptions, and experiences of all parties to the conflict and the major actors involved in its resolution. Finally, the research aims to make a theoretical contribution by applying the perspective of ontological security to an area studied largely from implicit Realist assumptions. The approach is novel in adopting a constructivist view of states as persons, building bridges between Realism and Constructivism (through the introduction of such concepts as *geopolitical identity*), looking at honour in foreign policy, outlining the limits of ontological security, and proposing research into epistemological security as a complementary perspective of the constructivist view of international relations (IR).

Most research on de facto states has not problematised or unpacked recognition and non-recognition.⁶ Yet, recognition is a curious thing. Fundamentally intersubjective, it is a social relationship based on mutuality and one could make an argument that the principle of reciprocity and with it a large part of diplomatic practice originates from it. There is a tendency in the IR literature, and particularly in Realist theory of IR, for long-established social institutions, such as recognition, to become reified, losing its intersubjective character and appear objective. They become walls that divide and chains that bind. Indeed, mutuality makes recognition like a chain: being recognised gives states the right to recognise other states. Accept a weak link into the chain, and it might break, accept a few and it might disintegrate. This is especially the view of the constitutive theory of state recognition, while the declaratory theory implies recognition ipso facto (by virtue of existence), and by equating fact with law it is equally objectifying (see Kelsen 1941 and Briggs 1949 as early participants in what was called the 'sterile debate' by the latter). So, where does one start unpacking the concept of recognition, not

⁶ Notable exceptions include Richards & Smith (2015), Fabry (2017), Caspersen (2018), and Coppieters (2018).

as a ticket to enter the club of internationally recognised states, not as a legal status, not as a set of criteria that describe which entities merit recognition? How does one examine recognition as an intersubjective bond between states, a relation of acceptance or rejection – in short – a relation of power, and the intersubjective nature of recognition – the perception and experience of it, its relation to identity, and how it shapes behaviour?

First,⁷ to examine recognition as intra- and inter-subjective means to reject the notion of its objectivity. Recognition is not a fact, but a relationship with others (inter-) and oneself (intra-). Second, recognition is subjective, it does not exist outside an actor's experience. States experience recognition and non-recognition differently. Third, as subjective, recognition can only be studied as a system of relations between actors and within an actor. The 'truth' of an experience of non-recognition is to be sought in the de facto state's relations with other states significant to it in which the perspectives of all actors must be considered. Fourth, perceptions of recognition shape identity, expectations, interests, goals, and finally behaviour. Non-recognition and recognition can enable or constrain states in how they act. We may expect non-recognition to constrain and recognition enable, but this cannot be taken for granted as it depends on the individual experience of a de facto state coping with non-recognition, including its informal relations, the strength of its fear of re-incorporation into the parent state, and its ontological anxieties. As we know, both Taiwan and Abkhazia lack international recognition of much of the international community, but their experiences are radically different. Fifth recognition and non-recognition are not only legal but also symbolic, social, and political relations. Recognition and non-recognition can be used as reward and punishment, as acceptance and rejection, as distinction and stigma. As such, they can not only influence identity but become part of it, and in the extreme become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Hegel, who introduced the notion of recognition into Western philosophy (Burns & Thompson 2013, 3), understood it in the context of the conflict of two self-consciousnesses, each a subjectivity trying to force its view and interpretation of

⁷ These five points are developed in the following chapters: in Chapter 1 theoretically, Chapter 2 historically, Chapter 3 methodologically, and in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, empirically.

the world on the other, engaged in a mortal combat in which each is trying to objectify the other while avoiding losing its subjectivity. This is the opposite of legal recognition in which the first state's recognition is usually reciprocated by the second state's recognition, with both now established as equal and disjunctive (each having exclusive sovereignty on its territory). Hegel's process of recognition is much more violent and offers no such reconciliation. Equality is possible only as a moment of "*recognizing themselves as mutually recognizing one another*" (Hegel 1977, 49–67), becoming conscious that they are, in fact, enemies. Recognition is the recognition of the Other, through which I recognise the Self. At the same time, it is the recognition of the conflict in which I find myself with the Other. The result is inequality, the hierarchy represented by the extreme positions of Master and Slave. While one is *recognised* as the Master, the other is *misrecognised* as a Slave; objectified by the Master who imposes its subjectivity on the situation. This relationship is dialectical and as such unstable, making it more complex than understanding to draw an analogy with de facto states demands. It is interesting that Hegel never discusses non-recognition. The Slave is not unrecognised, but misrecognised; he is not ignored, excluded, and isolated, but engaged, included, and exploited. De facto states face a combination of non-recognition and mis-recognition. While ignored by most of the international community, they are often actively stigmatised, vilified and objectified by their parent states. Just as recognition and non-recognition affect interaction, so does misrecognition. Russia, which has recognised Abkhazia, closely engages with it to the extent that the latter fears of becoming overdependent. Georgia, from which Abkhazia seceded, engages (and often mis-engages) with a mixture of threats and incentives aiming at future re-incorporation. The EU and the US exhibit non-engagement, engagement, and mis-engagement⁸ in their attempt to resolve the conflict, implicitly or explicitly in favour of maintaining Georgia's territorial integrity.

⁸ In conceptualizing engagement, I lean on Berg and Pegg (2016), who have borrowed the definition from the National Security Strategy of the United States of America. There, engagement is defined as "the active participation of the United States in relationships beyond our borders". The concept of 'engagement' is very close to the concept of 'interaction'. Both engagement and interaction describe a communicative act and an activity of establishing or maintaining a relationship. They can both be positive, negative, friendly or hostile, or neutral. Engagement however, is more closely tied to the sphere of international relations than interaction, which is a

This research examines how Abkhazia's political elites and foreign policy decision-makers in Russia, the EU and the US, who engage with Abkhazia, interpret non-recognition and how their interpretations influence the formulation and implementation of their respective foreign policy objectives and strategies. The aim of this research is to present the first multi-sided account of foreign policy interaction of a de facto state. It focuses on a single case study of Abkhazia between October 1999 and November 2014. Rather than ask *what* a de facto state is, this research looks at *how* a de facto state is. Instead of making assumptions about its foreign policy from its unrecognised status, it starts by looking at its foreign policy to identify how and by what it is enabled and constrained. Rather than focusing on *either* the de facto state's foreign policy or international engagement with it, it focuses on *both*. The research proceeds from a constructivist theoretical framework, claiming that non-recognition is ultimately what states (including de facto states) make of it. To capture both domestic and external geopolitical dimensions, the concepts of ontological security and geopolitical role, respectively, are introduced. Methodologically, the data was gathered through process tracing and semi-structured elite interviews with policy elites and decision makers in Sukhum/i, Tbilisi, Brussels, Moscow, and Washington D.C.

The thesis is composed of seven chapters, the first three establishing the theoretical, analytical, methodological, and historical foundations for the analysis of data presented in the last three chapters, which are empirical in nature. Chapter 1 introduces the research question and proceeds to construct a theoretical framework for this research project. Chapter 2 introduces the historical background and provides information about the case study of Abkhazia, including the criteria of case selection, the scope and time-frame of the research. Chapter 3 discusses research design and research strategy, operationalization of my theoretical concepts, data collection and analysis, validity and limitations of the research project. Chapter 4 focuses on Abkhazia, its identity and interactions,

more general sociological concept. Another point of distinction and a reason why I prefer the term 'engagement', is that engagement implies a more one-way relationship than interaction, which implies mutuality. Applied to my case, the US and the EU engage with Abkhazia, while Russia and Abkhazia interact with each other.

examining how decision-makers in Abkhazia interpret non-recognition and how it affects their foreign policy behaviour. Chapter 5 turns the focus to Abkhazia's patron – Russia: how its identity, domestic politics, and wider geopolitical considerations have shaped attitudes towards (non-)recognition of Abkhazia and shaped their relationship. Chapter 6 explores EU and US engagement of Abkhazia, including the interests, actors, and strategies involved. Chapter 7 is a synthesis bringing together theoretical and methodological discussions with empirical data to interpret the results and construct a more complete and coherent picture of Abkhazia's foreign interactions. Key insights are summarised, research questions answered, contributions, relevance, shortcomings, and avenues of further inquiry discussed.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework

“States are people too.”
– Alexander Wendt (2004, 291)

“States are people too, and people are states too - but neither are *essentially* so.”
– Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2004, 287)

Introduction

The first chapter of the thesis clarifies and elaborates the research puzzle announced in the introduction, developing the theoretical framework of the thesis that forms the basis of this research project. The chapter is structured by the research question: how do interpretations of non-recognition influence the foreign policy interactions⁹ between Abkhazia¹⁰ and recognised actors in the international community: Russia, the EU and the US? This is done in four steps. First, I take stock of the research on the foreign policy interaction of de facto states, identify the gaps in the literature and explain how they will be addressed. Second, I proceed to define and justify the use of the three core elements of my theoretical framework: identity in interaction, ontological security and geopolitical role. Third, I explore the intersections and interactions between these elements and integrate them into a coherent theoretical framework for the study of foreign policy interaction of de facto states, in particular the analysis of elite interpretations of non-recognition in interactions between de facto states and recognised actors in the international community. I do so with the view of reconciling the Realist and Constructivist elements of my approach and building bridges between the two theories. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a

⁹ Interaction is crucial in maintaining an identity and “contemporary states [...] can only survive as members of the state system; as such their survival motive is intrinsically relational and can only be expressed as a positioning of the self vis-a-vis other states” (Mitzen 2006, 357).

¹⁰ In this thesis, I have predominantly used the term ‘the Abkhaz’ to refer to the ethnic group (the Abkhaz language, for example). Exceptions include direct quotations that used ‘Abkhazians’ and my own use of the term when I wanted to emphasize that it refers not only to the ethnic group, but to all the citizens of Abkhazia, regardless of ethnicity. Similarly, I have used the term ‘Abkhazian’ in relation to the state of Abkhazia (Abkhazian foreign policy, for example).

discussion on how my theoretical framework can be applied to the study of the foreign policy interaction of de facto states (further developed in Chapter 2, 3, and 7) and what forms of explanation I expect this approach to yield.

The main theoretical contributions of the thesis put forward in this chapter and further discussed in Chapter 7, are the following. First, a problematisation of non-recognition not as a given, but as perceived, experienced, and socially constructed. Second, examining the nexus of identity and foreign policy of de facto states through an honour-centred perspective in order to produce a thick description of a single case study, with several within-case comparisons. Third, the application of ontological security perspective to de facto states to gain a better understanding of their existentialist situation and how they make sense of their being-in-the-world. Fourth, the identification of the limits of ontological security and the development of a complementary epistemological security perspective as a new original avenue of inquiry. Finally, an original typology of the geopolitical roles played by the de facto states.

IR theory and the study of de facto states

Although there is a growing body of literature dedicated to de facto states,¹¹ their interactions with other actors in the international community are still a much under-studied subject (Ker-Lindsay 2015). Although some early attempts at analysing the status of de facto states and how they relate to other actors in the international system were made (Lynch 2004), the studies of interactions of de facto states outside of the triangle de facto state–parent state–patron state¹² only emerged around the year 2010 with the literature on ‘engagement without recognition’ (Caspersen & Herrberg 2010; Cooley and Mitchell 2010; Popescu

¹¹ Legal scholars have long focused on the conflicting principles of territorial integrity and right to self-determination, status and recognition, occasionally touching on the issue of de facto states (Dickinson 1923; Kelsen 1941; Levitan 1946; Briggs 1949, and more recently Fabry 1999, 2012, 2013, 2015), political geographers on disentangling the state, territoriality and sovereignty (Agnew 2005, McConnell 2009), while more recently scholarship emerged on political systems and domestic politics (Ó Beacháin, Comai & Tsursumia-Zurabashvili 2016), political economy (Prelz Oltramonti 2015), state-building and democratisation (Caspersen 2011, 2013; Berg & ria 2012), legitimacy (Broers 2013; Berg & Mölder 2012) and public opinion (Toal, Kolossov, O’Loughlin 2013) in de facto states, to name just the main sub-fields.

¹² For a characterization of patron states see Graham and Horne (2012, 10-11).

2010; Ker-Lindsay 2015; Berg and Pegg 2016), while the foreign policy of de facto states came into focus only quite recently (Frear 2014; Smith 2018; Comai 2018).

In addition to the interaction between de facto states and other actors being under-studied, the scholarship on de facto states has hitherto not explored the issues of state identity and the meaning of (non-)recognition – the crucial elements of my research question – at any greater depth.¹³ Despite the fact that International Relations (IR) theory has had little to say about de facto states,¹⁴ I argue that drawing on – in particular Realism and Constructivism – can provide us with useful elements that can be combined into a coherent approach to explain how interpretations of non-recognition influence the foreign policy interactions between de facto states and recognised actors in the international community.

Making use of IR theory

Turning to IR theory, I briefly consider what Realism¹⁵ and Constructivism¹⁶ have brought to the study of de facto states before critically discussing their potential

¹³ In Chapter 7, I make a more explicit link between legal ‘thin’ recognition of states and social ‘thick’ recognition of actors in international relations

¹⁴ IR scholars have not paid much attention to de facto states, seeing them as a marginal and transient feature of international relations. In the words of Geldenhuys (2009, 1–2): “Do these entities really matter in the larger scheme of global politics? One must concede that their number pales into insignificance when compared with the total of 192 internationally recognised states seated in the United Nations General Assembly and representing 6.7 billion people. There are presently only ten self-declared independent entities, comprising about 33 million people, which have been functioning like states for several years.”

¹⁵ I understand Realist theory in a broad sense, from the pioneers, such as Morgenthau, and classics, such as Waltz, to Neo-Realism and its derivatives, such as Mearsheimer’s offensive neorealism. My intention here is not to build a straw man and then tear it apart with a critique, as many IR scholars did: “Realists are often at pains to recognise themselves in the portrayal of their detractors. Showing the ‘richness of the tradition’ can justifiably undermine some of the criticism” (Guzzini 2013, 111). However, despite recognizing that there is a large diversity within the Realist tradition, we cannot deny that there is much in common ground – for better and for worse.

¹⁶ After outlining the relevance of Constructivism for the study of de facto states, Voller (2012) chooses the post-modern, linguistic (also called ‘European’) version of Constructivism over the modern, positivist (also called ‘North American’) version. The North American version focuses on the importance of social norms and identities in the construction of international politics and is committed to a positivist agenda of “uncovering top-down/deductive mechanisms and causal relationships between actors, norms, interests and identity” (Checkel 2008, 72). The European version emphasizes language, linguistic constructions and social discourses in the constructing of international relations, focusing on interpreting identity creation and change rather than explaining relationships between states (Checkel 1998, 73). Rather than understanding how Iraqi Kurdistan interacts with the outside world, Voller attempts to trace the “international and transnational sources of the transformation of the Kurdish National Liberation Movement in Iraq into the Kurdistan Regional Government”. This in itself is not a shortcoming, but since my work

and limitations. Early research on de facto states (in 1990s and early 2000s), drawing on IR, although partial in scope¹⁷ as well as normatively,¹⁸ had two important advantages over other approaches. First, it widened the perspective of Conflict Studies, focused primarily on intra-state dynamics, by emphasising the role of big powers and regional hegemony in the emergence and sustenance of de facto states. Second, it introduced a comparative dimension, which focussed on de facto states themselves rather than the conflicts that involved them and from which they have emerged.¹⁹ Both of these points are relevant to my research. The widening of the perspective to include other actors than parent and patron state is especially important as I do not examine the conflict between a de facto state and its parent state specifically, but how a de facto state interacts with other states and international organisations. Furthermore, I consider not just the identity a de facto state, but the role it can play in the context of geopolitical competition in the region, and how playing a role can help sustain an identity through the preservation of ontological security. Although I do not compare different de facto states, the comparative dimension is there in comparing the interactions of a single de facto state with different recognised actors.

State-centrism,²⁰ is also central to my project as I focus largely on states (with the exception of the EU); their identities, elite interpretations of non-recognition and their foreign policy interaction. Realist theory of IR has not delved very deep into the question of state identity, even though identity politics have come to the

concerns foreign policy interaction between de facto states and recognised actors in the international community, his linguistic turn and the choice of European Constructivism – and in particular the theory of Communicative action as the “pivotal concept for understanding processes of change” (Voller 2012, 16) – is not a good fit and I therefore follow the ‘North American’ version of Constructivism more closely.

¹⁷ De facto states were studied mostly as an epiphenomenon of ethno-political conflicts

¹⁸ De facto states were seen as illegitimate ‘geopolitical black holes’ and warlord-run zones (Lynch 2007, 489). For a review of Western academic discourse on the post-Soviet de facto states see Yemelianova (2015).

¹⁹ Lynch (2004, 18), who is a good example of these scholars, has argued that as far as actors of international relations go, “there are states and there is little else” – a claim that can be argued for or against, but that is strongly present in de facto states themselves.

²⁰ Caspersen (2012, 68): “However much we talk about globalisation, erosion of the state, and the increasing irrelevance of territory, statehood remains the top prize.” Isachenko (2012, 19) acknowledges that mainstream international relations theories are not particularly useful in studying de facto states, but does, however concede that realism is a tempting starting point due to its state-centric approach. It is important to note, however (and Isachenko does not mention this), that there is a false incompatibility between Realism and (part of) Constructivism as Constructivism can be either rule-centric (Onuf 1989; Kratochwil 1989) or state-centric (Wendt 1999).

forefront of international relations already in the late 1980s.²¹ After the Cold War was over,²² the interactions between states changed and “strange and especially brutal conflicts erupted in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Africa and elsewhere”²³ (Gantzel 1997). The focus of the study of IR widened from external interactions to include the role of internal dynamics and processes in states. These changes in the international system also brought about changes in the *identity* of states: – a category not considered to hold decisive explanatory weight by Realist IR scholars, who typically saw states as black boxes without delving into their internal structure and relations between different sub-state systems and social groups. This perspective proved to be very constraining for the study of de facto states, where the border between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the state is less apparent and where policies directed towards others often have domestic reasons or vice versa (explored in depth on the case of Abkhazia in Chapter 4). Constructivism, which focuses on the interplay between identity and interaction as the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the state respectively, can be more helpful in furthering my project and help to answer the question how interpretations of non-recognition affect foreign policy interaction of de facto states. This, however, does not necessarily mean that Realist contributions, such as its emphasis on material factors and conflict, have to be abandoned. On the contrary, Constructivist examination of identity must add a layer of understanding rather than subtract from the already accumulated knowledge. Although the importance of physical security – emphasized by Realism (Steele 2008, 1) – for de facto states cannot be over-emphasized, several other forms of security are also important to these relatively young entities undertaking nation and state-building projects in the context of lacking recognition. As I demonstrate later, Constructivism broadens the concept of security to include other forms, including ontological security (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Rumelili 2014), which is particularly relevant for examining the linkage between identity and interaction of de facto states.

²¹ As Hall (1999, 3) states: “Nationalist and ethnic conflict, not cold war tensions or ‘superpower balancing in the periphery’ now largely consume the agendas of United Nations and NATO as well as the foreign policy concerns of powers, great and small.”

²² “After the end of the Cold War, realism has been again on the defensive” (Guzzini 2013, 109).

²³ The linkage of “nation” and “state,” long unquestioned as the irreducible unit of global politics, suddenly seemed very questionable indeed. In some places, the future existence of a state, at least as we thought we knew it, was in doubt.” (Ferguson 2003, 1).

IR scholarship has, as mentioned before, taken little interest in de facto states and has not developed specific approaches to study how different actors interpret recognition or how this affects the way de facto states engage and are engaged by others.²⁴ Because there are no 'ready-to-use' approaches available, a theoretical framework has to be developed by selecting compatible elements possessing explanatory power and combining them into a coherent whole, which can then be operationalized and applied for the use in fieldwork.

State identity, ontological security and geopolitical role

This thesis examines how interpretations of non-recognition influence interactions between a de facto state and recognised actors in the international community. In order to conceptualize this, I introduce three elements that make up my theoretical framework:

1. State identity²⁵ shaped through interaction: how political elites in de facto states interpret the world around them and the actions of other actors depends on their identity. Everything they perceive is mediated through their culture and these interpretations shape their (inter)actions.
2. Ontological security: identity does not exist in isolation. It is shaped through interaction and at the same time identity provides the basis for interaction. Foreign policy of de facto states is based on preservation of their de facto independence, which includes both physical security as the security of identity (ontological security).
3. Geopolitical role in the context of geopolitical competition: interactions between de facto states and recognised actors happen in a specific context. In the case post-Soviet de facto states, the context of geopolitical competition between Russia and the West is very important.

²⁴ Isachenko's (2012) work draws heavily on IR but remains critical of the discipline's contributions in studying de facto states. Isachenko (2012, 3) correctly states that "a solid conceptual framework for the analysis of these politically ambiguous spaces is still lacking."

²⁵ State identity is further unpacked in this chapter. At this point it is important to understand it as a self-identity (the way the state sees itself). For the external identity that is based on how others see it, I am using the term 'social identity', further elaborated in Chapter 3.

I first introduce each of the concepts and then explore the relations between them with a view of fleshing out a coherent theoretical framework applicable to my research project.

State identity of de facto states

To define de facto state identity, a de facto state²⁶ must first be defined. Although this has already been done in the introduction, it is useful to distinguish between different forms of (non-)recognition, including partial or limited recognition. This is especially important in my case, since Abkhazia is a partially recognised de facto state – and as we will see in Chapter 4 and 7, this has implications for everything from its ontological security to its foreign policy confidence.²⁷

As stated, there has been little discussion regarding the identity of de facto states and when identity was brought up, it was taken as something static and given – as a constant rather than as dynamic and reflexive.²⁸ Early studies in 1990s often saw de facto states as a threat to the international system of sovereign states,²⁹ as exceptions and temporary anomalies resulting from the dissolution of Soviet Union³⁰ or worse – as criminalized badlands and black spots (Stanislowski 2008). As Caspersen and Herrberg (2010, 8) have put it: “without sovereignty, anarchy is assumed.” An ontological statement *par excellence*, it squares well with the view of ontological security scholars that “behind the routines of daily life, chaos lurks” (Mitzen 2006, 346). With conflicts becoming stable (Rumelili 2015) – rather than frozen³¹ – and with the publication of

²⁶ For analogous terms see Geldenhuys (2009). Although the term ‘unrecognised state’ may be more widespread and popular (especially outside academia, in journalistic use), the majority of scholars studying these entities uses the term ‘de facto states’ (O’Loughlin et al. 2015, 2), which emphasizes their identity as states over the circumstance of non-recognition.

²⁷ Limited recognition is not only significant in terms of legal status, but also in terms of political expectations of de facto states and their confidence in foreign policy. After Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia in 2008, the latter expected that many more countries would follow, but only 5 (out of which two later cancelled their recognition) did until now. However, this did boost the confidence of Abkhazian elites to pursue multi-vector foreign policy.

²⁸ The best Realists can come up with is a “type identity [which] has no associated behavioural requirement, which means nothing about a state’s identity is at stake in interaction. Interaction is driven by physical security needs and is not linked to identity” (Mitzen 2006, 355).

²⁹ Hale (2000) used the term ‘parade of sovereignties’ suggesting the possible domino effect.

³⁰ See Pegg (1998) and Lynch (2004), for example.

³¹ See Rutland (2007) and Broers (2015) for criticism of the concept of frozen conflict.

comparative studies³² (focusing mostly on the de facto states in the Caucasus)³³ these views were balanced, and de facto states became somewhat ‘normalized’ in the academic discourse (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2012). In some cases, state-building successes and democratic achievements were acknowledged (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Somaliland). De facto states themselves often drew on Freedom House Ratings, which were sometimes (in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh) better than those of their parent states or equal to it (in the case of Abkhazia) (Broers 2014, 152; Gerrits and Bader 2016, 307). Despite these changes in the perception of de facto state identity, there was little discussion about identity itself and its relation to non-recognition, which also remains to be taken as a given (constraining factor) and one that largely shapes the identity and behaviour of de facto states, including their foreign policy.³⁴ Since I am examining the relationship between collective cognitive processes (interpretation of non-recognition) and political practices (foreign policy formulation and implementation), it is important to examine how the identities of de facto states are shaped and what are the key factors in this process. I argue that examining state identity can help us explain their foreign policy. At the same time, looking at how they interact with other actors can tell us more about what de facto states are.³⁵

Differing from Realism, Constructivism makes identity the core concept, defining it as a “property of intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioural dispositions” (Wendt 1994, 385) and sees identity as rooted in state “self-understandings.” Wendt (1999, 277) distinguishes between four kinds of state identity: personal or corporate, type identity, collective identity, and – the most

³² Pegg (1998, 4–11) was one of the first who tried to theorize engagement with de facto states on a more general level.

³³ De Wall (2003), Cornell (1999), and Svensson (2009) have done a great job in comparing ethnic-political conflicts and unrecognised entities in the Caucasus, while still focusing primarily on Nagorno-Karabakh. Khintba (2010), Grono (2010) and Popescu (2007) have focused more on Georgia’s breakaway republics, but also maintained the regional focus. Latawski et al. (2003) focused on Kosovo but is also rich on the context of regional disintegration.

³⁴ I discuss non-recognition’s effects on identity beyond the legal and the political, extending into inter- and intra-subjective: in relation to honor, stigma, shame, and guilt (Chapter 4), dependence, isolation, and proactiveness (Chapters 5 and 6) and sour grapes, fatalism, and self-fulfilling prophecy (Chapter 7).

³⁵ The approach is pragmatic – look what they do, not what they are – but the findings testify to both and as evidenced in Chapter 7 and the Conclusion, the contributions of the thesis are of theoretical, empirical and policy nature.

relevant for this case – the role identity.³⁶ The national role identity exists only in relation to others and “is achieved by occupying positions in a ‘social structure’ and observing ‘behavioural norms’ towards others” (Wendt 1999, 277). Several authors³⁷ have pointed out that state-building, establishment of good governance, respect for human rights and democratisation – although internal political processes – are also aimed at foreign audiences. Broers (2013, 146) argued that de facto states “present an enduring paradox: they simultaneously transgress and mimic the basic structure of the international state system.” Although the issue of legitimacy and legitimization has been touched upon by these and other authors,³⁸ little has been done in terms of explaining how norms³⁹ are internalized by de facto states and how this internalisation affects their interaction with other actors.⁴⁰ This is where Constructivist literature on state socialisation,⁴¹ as a process central to international normative diffusion (Alderson 2001, 416) and Isachenko’s (2012) focus on dynamic and relational aspects of identity construction can help fill the gaps and allow us to understand identity as a changing and unfinished open-ended process influenced by external interaction.

³⁶ Holsti (1970, 234) introduces a similar concept of ‘national roles’ “as possible causal variables in the operation of international systems, or in explaining the foreign policies of individual nations.”

³⁷ Caspersen (2011, 338–344) acknowledged that there has been an evolution in the argumentation of the claims for independence: as in the past these were primarily based on identity and grievances, today they are more and more based on alleged progress in democratization. Voller (2015, 4) pointed to that in 2003 United Nations conditioned Kosovo’s recognition with implementation of eight principles of good governance, which included, among others: ‘free elections, protection of the rights and property of minorities, protection of private property, and equality for women’, which has not gone unnoticed by other de facto states. The UN policy of ‘standards before status’ in the case of Kosovo has prompted other de-facto states to try to earn sovereignty through democratization (Caspersen 2008, 2009), or at least through rhetorically promoting democracy and human rights in expectance of de jure recognition (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2011, 182).

³⁸ See Kolstø (2006); Caspersen (2009); Berg (2012), Bakke, O’Loughlin, Toal and Ward (2013); Protsyk (2013).

³⁹ Constructivists believe that focusing on social norms offers an alternative to accounts based on interest and power (Alderson 2001). However, we must not simply replace power with identity as Hall (1999, 6) does: “Against the ‘will-to-power’ of the state, in realist analysis, as the ultima ratio of international political interaction, I will posit the will-to-manifest-identity’ of social collectives as agents that spawn the social construction of domestic and social global orders.”

⁴⁰ I discuss modelling and mimicking that Abkhazia employs in order to present an image of normalcy to the world (Chapter 4) and how it is at the same time a state and acts as a state (Chapter 7).

⁴¹ Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, 901–4) define state socialisation as an internalizing mechanism by which states adopt norms present elsewhere in the international system in an unequal relationship and under the pressure of ‘peer states’. It should be mentioned here, that for de facto states ‘peer states’ are mostly patrons and potential patrons – states that are seen as possible sources of support and – ultimately – recognition.

Focusing on relationality allows identity to be explored not as something fixed, but as dynamic and changing over time. Identity and action are in a dialectical relationship and identity is manifested through action, while action affirms identity.⁴² Isachenko (2012, 25) emphasizes that “motives and intents of actors are important, but the dynamic which develops in this process cannot be explained strictly in terms of these motives and intents.” She claims that de facto states (using the term ‘informal states’ to refer to them) are “a messy solution to a messy problem” (Isachenko 2012, 15). Perhaps one of the most important lessons to be drawn from her work is that by adopting an inter-subjective, relational approach, power also needs to be reconceptualised in this way. This in turn pushes us to problematize the conceptual framework that scholars of de facto states have used for analysing subjectivity: parent, patron, and puppet.⁴³ De facto states are neither strong nor weak, viable or non-viable outside these relations with other states.⁴⁴ Isachenko’s (2012) historical approach emphasizes that these relations are dynamic and liable to change. The margin of independence (not formal but actual) therefore depends on the context and the types of interaction. My own research builds on these insights, proceeding to discuss the historical context of the case study at some length in Chapter 2 and adds a cultural dimension to it by focusing on Abkhazia’s cultural norms, including the importance of honour in its foreign policy (Chapter 4).

Isachenko (2012, 7–9) introduces another useful conceptual distinction between *stateness* – the understanding of the state as a fixed territorial entity and *statecraft* – the ways statehood is constructed and maintained. She advocates a shift from questioning *what* the state *is* to *how* state and sovereignty are *produced*. This is useful as I explore not *what* de facto states are (status or identity), but *how* they are (engagement or interaction), and fits well with a more existentialist view (based on Hegel’s view of recognition and Laing’s view of

⁴² As put by Mitzen (2006, 365) “Assuming that important aspects of state identity are constituted relationally provides new theoretical leverage on interaction dynamics and can lead to practical implications for important problems in world politics.”

⁴³ A parallel with socialisation is that relations between de facto states are not limited to their parent and patron, just like socialisation does not only take place in the family.

⁴⁴ Another parallel with socialisation is that when it comes to norm internationalisation, states find themselves in an unequal position vis-à-vis their peers who have adopted them, just like an individual to be socialized finds itself in an unequal position vis-à-vis someone who has already undergone the process of socialisation.

ontological security) of the de facto states hinted at in the Introduction and further discussed in Chapter 7 and the Conclusion. This conceptual shift represents the move from Realist ontology of state as a given, objective, territorially fixed and largely unchangeable entity to a Constructivist ontology of state as socially constructed, subjective, territorially fluid and constantly changing entity. Isachenko (2012, 21) further distinguishes between ‘*seeing the state*’ and ‘*doing the state*’, where doing the state is essentially an interactive process of internal and external state building. She puts more emphasis on the former, making the assumption that “by looking at the *state-building* practices of informal states, we can gain a better understanding of how world politics operate” (Isachenko 2012, 3).⁴⁵ Although I agree that examining *domestic* processes (as I do in Chapter 5 and 6 when I explore Russian, EU and US engagement with Abkhazia) can help us better understand de facto states, I believe that the nexus of *internal* processes (culture, identity, self-perception, norms and values) and *external* reality – the institutional context of non-recognition and de facto states foreign policy interaction – is even less well understood and can valuably contribute to the understanding of not only de facto states but world politics more broadly.

Non-recognition is variously seen as part of state identity of de facto states⁴⁶ and as an institution (or the institutional context in which they operate).⁴⁷ International law⁴⁸ has distinguished between recognition as a legal and political act. Kelsen

⁴⁵ Another shortcoming of Isachenko’s study (and a common problem with post-structuralist and constructivist theory) is that it is not sufficiently grounded in territoriality, instead relying on ideational elements, such as identity and the bricolage and spontaneity of informal practices.

⁴⁶ In what seems to be a good metaphor for (non-)recognition of de facto states Mitzen (2006, 347) states: “Think of the aspiring actor who waits tables. He may see himself as an actor, and take classes, audition and talk constantly about theatre. But until he gets the breakthrough role, in an important sense he cannot ‘be’ an actor. There is simply no way for us to know him as such; to society he is a waiter.”

⁴⁷ Non-recognition has largely been perceived as a negative and constraining circumstance: “If a strategy can be planned regardless of circumstances, a tactic is characterized by dependency on the circumstances” (Isachenko 2012, 3). Non-recognition in this context is the overriding circumstance, which condemns a de facto state to tactical level, which is the “space of the other”. This distinction fits very well into my conceptual framework of geopolitical roles de facto states play. See King (2001) for an analysis of benefits non-recognition can have for political elites in de facto states.

⁴⁸ International law had defined the criteria for recognition in the Montevideo Declaration of 1933 (territory, population, effective government and ability to enter into relations with other countries). It has therefore prescribed what a state should be, but not how it should come to be (Briggs 1949, 115). However even with the criteria about what the state should be remain vague and the decision to recognise is ultimately a political one and depends on the interests of states, which are under no legal duty to recognise an entity that has fulfilled these criteria (Briggs 1949, 114).

(1941, 607) argued that the question what the state is, has “to be answered from the observation of the practice of states” rather than through what Briggs (1949, 120) called a ‘sterile debate’ – between declarative and constitutive theories of recognition that ask the question “whether the act of recognition ‘confirmed’ previously existing rights or ‘created’ new rights.” It is therefore useful to define recognition not in terms of identity,⁴⁹ but as an institution and to emphasize its relationality – it defines the position of a state in the international community vis-à-vis other actors and can be understood as the sum of external political relations of a particular state. Knowing that there is little they can do to challenge the institution of recognition itself,⁵⁰ de facto states adopt different strategies, tactics and defence mechanisms to cope with their existential situation. They may try to socialize into recognised states through internalizing internationally accepted norms, to construct counter-narratives to battle stigma, balance their interactions to avoid overdependence on any one actor, conduct social moves (further elaborated in Chapters 4 and 7) to strengthen external legitimacy or resort to defence mechanisms to maintain ontological security when their behaviours could threaten their self-perceptions and conceptions of honour. All this is done through processes, which are internal but at the same time directed outwards at international audiences.

The great majority of scholarship on de facto states takes non-recognition for granted also in considering it as a constraining factor *a priori*, often viewing it in substantive terms, as if non-recognition was a *property* or a negative *characteristic* rather than a *relation* without a fixed value and always dependent on what it relates to.⁵¹ Acknowledging that non-recognition is (inter-)subjective and focusing on the interpretation of non-recognition by both political elites in de

⁴⁹ “While recognition does not make a state, it does serve to legitimize the state as a member of the wider inter-national community” (Ker-Lindsay 2015, 269).

⁵⁰ The institution of recognition serves to protect the norms of sovereignty territorial integrity and the power to recognise is only afforded to recognised sovereign states and international organisations formed by states.

⁵¹ The symptom of this rigid approach is the concept of ‘frozen conflict’, which although heavily criticized by most of de facto state scholars (Rutland 2007, Broers 2015) continues to persist in journalistic and - to an extent - policy discourse. The concept does not correspond to reality and it does not allow to perceive these conflicts as dynamic, evolving, peaceful only within the limits of fragile and temporary ceasefires (and not peace agreements) that may and are broken when renewed violence erupts, as we have seen in Georgia (2008) and more recently in Nagorno-Karabakh.

facto states as well as in recognised actors, can help explain interactions between them. Although non-recognition represents a significant (physical and ontological) security problem for de facto states and constrains their foreign policy options, it does not directly determine how non-recognition affects the interactions between de facto states and recognised actors. I expect that this depends on how non-recognition is experienced and interpreted by political elites in de facto state, parent state, patron state and the international community. I make two initial hypotheses here and then assess them in the light of empirical evidence in the concluding chapter:

1. Interpretation of non-recognition (by both de facto states as well as recognised actors) depends on both the internal situation in the de facto state and the wider geopolitical context in which it exists.⁵²
2. Interpretation of non-recognition (by both de facto states as well as recognised actors) shapes interaction: foreign policy of de facto state, counter-recognition strategies of parent state,⁵³ support of patron and engagement by the international community.

Having discussed state identity and how it is shaped through internal processes (state-building), state socialisation (norm internalization) and non-recognition (as mediated through the interpretation of policy elites), I have hypothesised that the internal situation in the de facto state and the wider geopolitical considerations influence interpretations of non-recognition, which in turn shape interaction between de facto state and other actors. Since I am interested in *how* this happens, I need to look at how the internal situation in the de facto state and the wider geopolitical considerations are considered when foreign policy is made. I

⁵² While Georgia interprets the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as ‘occupied territories’ and the interaction with them as ‘creeping recognition’, its ally the US does not follow this interpretation. In an analysis of US diplomatic cables leaked by Bradley Manning and made public by WikiLeaks, Berg and Pegg (2016, 17) have shown that US “is cognizant of parent-state preferences and takes them into account but that those preferences are not determinative of its willingness to engage de facto states. Strategic considerations arguably play a greater role in influencing US interactions with de facto states.” Berg and Pegg (2016) have also shown that interaction is largely event-driven, meaning it considers changes in the geopolitical situation in the region as well as internal developments in de facto states. For instance: “In order to counterbalance the increasing Russian influence in the South Caucasus, the US government brought Abkhazia more into focus in 2009” (Berg and Pegg 2016, 8).

⁵³ See Ker-Lindsay (2012) and Beacháin, Comai & Tsurtsunia-Zurabashvili (2016).

do this through the perspective of ontological security and geopolitical role, respectively.

The perspective of ontological security

It would be a mistake to underplay the importance of physical security for de facto states, especially given the fact that most of them emerged out of violent conflicts. Nevertheless, ontological security is just as important – and in some cases – more important “because its fulfilment affirms a state’s self-identity (i.e. it affirms not only its physical existence but primarily how a state sees itself and secondarily how it wants to be seen by others)” (Steele 2008, 3). Indeed, of what importance is one’s physical survival if one is unsure about one’s own identity?⁵⁴ If the crisis of ontological insecurity lasts long enough, it can go so far as to undermine physical security itself.⁵⁵ As demonstrated empirically in Chapters 4 and 5, and discussed in reference to literature and theory in Chapter 7, de facto states face the same ontological dilemma regarding their relations with parent and patron states: what do they gain if they wrest the territory from the parent state but lose their de facto independence to their patron,⁵⁶ if they gain security, but lose their identity in the process?

Ontological security can be defined as a “sense of continuity and order in events” (Giddens 1991, 243) and conversely, ontological insecurity “refers to the deep,

⁵⁴ I do not see identity as a final destination that can be reached, and ontological security achieved once and for all - it is an ongoing and contested process consisting of temporary identifications. However, retrospectively and through nation and state-building, most de facto states manage to construct relatively stable relational social identities and national role conceptions and as such enjoy a degree of ontological security sustained through nationally accepted political narratives.

⁵⁵ In the Bible we are asked “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36) and there are several historical examples (from Huns to Mongols) when a nation has conquered another people but was in turn conquered by and wholly assimilated into the culture of the conquered. They achieved military conquest but lost the ontological war and ceased to exist as a separate people.

⁵⁶ In the case of post-Soviet de facto states similarities between the post-Soviet and post-colonial context become apparent (see Moore 2001 for the discussion whether the post- in post-colonial is the post- in post-Soviet). This similarity is *a fortiori* true for de facto states, whose need for the political (and in most cases economic) support of the patron puts them in a position similar to decolonised states’ (mostly economic) dependence on their former colonizers. In post-colonial context political independence and attainment of sovereignty have often meant substituting formal political imperialism with informal economic imperialism and relationships of domination and control by the same colonial ‘core’. Kuzio (2002), for example, merges the two contexts into a term ‘post-Soviet colonial space’ and Beissinger and Young (2002) dedicate a whole book to the comparison of post-colonial Africa and post-Soviet Eurasia.

incapacitating state of not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore, i.e. how to get by in the world” (Mitzen 2006, 345): “The actor’s identity [is] insecure. Individuals are therefore motivated to create cognitive and behavioural certainty, which they do by establishing routines” (Mitzen 2006, 324). This insecurity is only exacerbated by non-recognition and the difficulties *de facto* states face in establishing interaction routines (official and diplomatic channels of communication and cooperation),⁵⁷ making interactions largely *ad hoc*, unpredictable and uncertain. Ontologically insecure states are “consumed meeting immediate needs” and “cannot relate ends systematically to means in the present, much less plan ahead” (Mitzen 2006, 345).⁵⁸ But why do states have ontological security, and how is it possible to justify the use of this concept? Steele (2008, 20) convincingly argues that “The reason states have an ontological security is because they have a historical account of themselves that has been ‘built up’ through the narrative of agents of the past, present, and the future.”

The ontological security perspective does not exclude physical security and does not marginalize its importance; physical security is a necessary, although not sufficient condition for ontological security. Similarly, it implies no determination, but simply states that preservation of self-identity matters to states and that failure to realise the socially constructed ontological aspirations of a polity (a failure that can itself be the result of physical security challenges) can have security consequences that cannot be explained by traditional accounts of security. This perspective sheds light on how states aim to fulfil their self-identity needs and aspires to unpack the ‘motives’ of state behaviour. While Steele looks at moral, humanitarian, and honour-driven motives (Steele 2008, 2) but only the latter is of immediate interest for this case as I explain in the next chapter. It is worth mentioning that honour-driven motives may seem “irrational – yet such behavior must have made sense to the state agents who decided upon that course of action at the time” (Steele 2008, 3). In other words: ontological security

⁵⁷ For example, in the case of Abkhazia, much of routinized interaction with countries, which have not recognised it, only occurs within the format of Geneva International Discussions between Abkhazia, Georgia and the co-chairs: EU, OSCE and UN.

⁵⁸ This is similar to Isachenko’s (2012, 3) above mentioned view of *de facto* states only being able to operate on the tactical, but not on the strategic level: “If a strategy can be planned regardless of circumstances, a tactic is characterized by dependency on the circumstances.”

perspective enables us to see rationality behind state actions, which Realists, focusing on physical security, would deem irrational.

There are two versions of the ontological security perspective. The first is Mitzen's (2006) and focuses on collective aspects, emphasizing identity constitution through interaction. The second version is Steele's (2008) and focuses on individual aspects, looking at how identity arises through the construction of narratives.⁵⁹ Steele's version is based on the claim that "actors already constructed some sense of self and some understanding of others prior to contact" (Inayatullah & Blaney 1996, 73). An old philosophical dilemma whether essence precedes existence – which threatens to open up here – is relatively easily resolved when it comes to most de facto states (and all post-Soviet de facto states). Several of them only came into existence as de facto independent in 1990s. While it is in this time that they entered into contact and interaction with the outside world, their national identity together with narratives about it has already been established (although it continues to change) as a result of a long historical process.⁶⁰ Although providing a convincing account of the internal dynamics of the state, Steele eventually takes a linguistic turn, goes down the postmodernist constructivist path and becomes increasingly focused on the Self and the state narratives that sustain it. Since de facto states like Abkhazia cannot be studied in isolation from the conflicts and the context of the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Tekushev, Markedonov and Shevchenko 2013), I am interested primarily in the relations between interaction and the ontological security of de facto states. Therefore, I more closely follow Mitzen's version, which is a better fit, but also incorporate Steele's use of 'routine' and 'critical situation' (concepts taken over from Giddens) – which I proceed to define – into the conceptual framework.

⁵⁹ According to Lebow (2012) there is no identity in the strict sense; we only have a phenomenological identity of the moment. Therefore, it is therefore better to speak of identifications rather than of identities.

⁶⁰ One could argue that this is not the case of Transnistria. At the time of its emergence as a de facto state it had little in a way of a positive identity, but its negative identity was strong – people did not know what they wanted their state to be, but they knew they did not want to be part of Moldova, which was drawing ever closer to Romania.

According to Giddens (1984, 171) “agents encounter social structures through the sustained activity of self-identity fulfilment through foreign policy. States consciously reproduce actions that then in turn form a structure through what can be called agency because ‘human societies, or social systems, would plainly not exist without human agency.’” Based on this, Steele sees foreign policy as the realisation of self-identity through routines. Policy elites construct a notion of state identity out of temporary identifications through *discourse* and *action*: the product of the first are *narratives*, the product of the second are *routines*. The “forging of selves, then, is a path-dependent process, since it has to cram in a number of previously negotiated identities in order to be credible” (Neumann 1999, 218–219). If the routines, on which it is based, and which sustain it are disrupted, the ontological security of the state is threatened.⁶¹

“De facto states act to fulfil their self-identity needs and preserve their ontological security, sometimes going as far as compromising their physical security and even their existence” (Jakša 2017, 31). Fabry notes not only that ontological security is not dependent on recognition, but that recognition can even show cracks in it: “While foreign recognition of statehood may fulfil a deep psychological need, it is its denial that makes a people’s collective sense of who they are more robust. Obtaining recognition as a state may, in fact, reveal the fragility of national identity within that state” (Fabry 2017, 23). As mentioned, non-recognition, does not affect the ontological security of de facto states (along with their behaviour) directly. Rather, this happens indirectly as non-recognition is interpreted by the political elites, and it is these elite interpretations of non-recognition and non-engagement that influence the ontological security de facto states. All post-Soviet de facto states have gone through at least three ‘critical situations’: 1) collapse of the USSR; 2) military conflict with their parent state for the control over the territory claimed by the de facto state; and 3) international recognition of territorial integrity of their parent state, ruling out their own recognition of independence. A gradual shift in perception (it sometimes happens at the same time as the third

⁶¹ Giddens (1984, 61) calls these disruptions ‘critical situations’ and defines them as “radical disjunctions of an unpredictable kind affecting substantial numbers of individuals.” Critical situations need to be interpreted as such by policy makers, they cannot be predicted and normally catch states unprepared (Steele 2008, 12). Ontologically secure states show more resilience when faced with critical situations, which disrupt routines that sustain a state’s self-identity.

critical situation) occurs when the state is not preoccupied anymore with its own existential questions and tending to its needs and has the ability and confidence to enter into relations with other states with realistic expectations. Looking at de facto states, this usually occurs when de facto state stops prioritizing the long-term quest for recognition (accepts its unrecognised status) and focuses instead on short and medium-term goals, such as state-building, attracting aid and investment, and forging cultural links.

In relation to the ontological security perspective I briefly examine the 'level of analysis problem' (sometimes referred to as the problem of 'personification' or 'reification' of the state), which - although not unique to ontological security perspective - is often the target of Waltz-inspired⁶² Realist attacks. As Steele (2005, 529) notes: "most models of International Relations base the needs of states on some type of individual and human need" and then scale it to the collective entity. Realism derives relations between states from Hobbesian relations between individuals and Liberalism from rational self-interested *homines oeconomici*. But this 'everyone else does it' argument is not enough to convince the sceptics of the 'scaling-up' and in addition to Mitzen's three defences, Steele (2008, 18) offers his own defence, which is perhaps the most convincing: "because they represent their state, state agents 'are the state' because they have the moral burden of making policy choices and the capacity to implement those decisions."⁶³ My own argument to back these is that since individuals in the society and the state share the same culture (the argument is stronger when there is a distinct culture with well-defined norms, like the *apswara* in Abkhazia, examined in Chapter 4), the same patterns of perceiving, experiencing, interpreting, assessing, and responding are present at both levels. These defences notwithstanding, Realists may argue that the concept of ontological security is too loose or too vague. This accusation can be countered by pointing out that it is actually the Realist understanding of identity that is loose

⁶² In his 1959 book, *Man, the State, and War*, Waltz introduces three 'images' or levels of analysis: individual (personalities of leaders), national (domestic politics) and international (inter-state politics).

⁶³ This 'representing the state' versus 'being the state' is similar to Isachenko's (2012, 7) above mentioned distinction between 'statecraft'- the ways statehood is constructed and maintained as opposed to 'stateness' - the understanding of the state as a fixed territorial entity.

because it treats identity as a vaguely defined ‘type’ while its behaviourist view of states as ‘black boxes’ or ‘billiard balls’ prevents it from exploring intra-state dynamics and providing an account of how identity is shaped by and shapes the (inter)actions of states. This is precisely what the emphasis on ontological security allows. It enables one to structure their understanding of disparate and ever-changing state interests into a more coherent whole: “state interests change all the time, and if this is the case, then identity changes are possible within similar institutional forms. Ontological security helps connect interests to these sudden engagements with identity” (Steele 2008, 20). When interests are not material (such as ontological and identity-related), a synthesis of Realist and Constructivist perspectives is the only way not to abandon either for the sake of the other.

The perspective has certain limitations beyond the ones mentioned in the literature and referred to above and that have become clearer to me throughout the research process. I argue that the most important of these limitations is that ontological security tends to cover – and fails to distinguish between – both *ontological security* and what I call *epistemological security*. If ontological security is the security of identity (the internal self), then epistemological security can be conceptualised as the security of the knowledge about the environment and different actors (elaborated further in Chapter 7). Nevertheless, the perspective of ontological security, especially its emphasis on narratives (discourse) and routines (action) does, enable a closer look at the internal situation in de facto states, enabling concrete elements of de facto states’ behaviour to be examined. Having stated that I follow the North American version of Constructivism more closely, I am primarily concerned with routines (actions) and not narratives (discourse),⁶⁴ which has influenced my choice of methodology (Chapter 3).

⁶⁴ The routines (action) and narratives (discourse) are interdependent and do not develop independently one without the other. Therefore, the distinction I make is not of a theoretical, but of practical character – it is a necessary methodological distinction to either focus on conducting the process tracing of foreign policy behaviour through interviews or to focus on conducting discourse analysis of documentary data. Doing both at the same time would not only complicate the methodology but prolong the research beyond the scope of this thesis.

Geopolitical role

I now turn to and the wider geopolitical considerations and their influence on de facto states' foreign policy. I do this through introducing and developing the concept of geopolitical role, which brings together ideational (state identity) and material (territoriality) aspects of de facto states' identity. Realists largely view "state motivations as fixed across time and state agents, and myopically connected to the survival drive of states" (Steele 2008, 8). Studies of de facto states have tended to focus on de facto state's relationship to its patron state, parent state, or have simply denied any agency to de facto states (Frear 2014, 83).⁶⁵ Isachenko (2012, 3) has argued that de facto states employ different tactics, but non-recognition prevents them from having a strategy of their own (except when it comes to domestic policies). Instead they figure as objects in strategies of others and are much more reactive than proactive in their behaviour. This essentially Realist view puts severe constraints on agency and begs the question whether the constraints have anything to do with non-recognition and everything to do with the power capacities of the (non-recognised) state.

Instead, I propose to adopt a Constructivist view of how de facto states cope with non-recognition. "To paraphrase Alexander Wendt, international social order is what states make of it, and thus what roles they play. The resulting international order thus shapes the social parameters within which individual states (and non-state actors) pursue their individual ambitions and resolve their collective problems" (Harnisch et al. 2011, 2). Focusing on the role "offers a promising avenue for resolving on of IR theory's most intractable problems, the relationship between actors and the system in international relations. Roles, as the notions of actors about who they are, what they would like to be with regard to others, and how they therefore should interact in (international) social relationships, are at the intersection between those two levels of analysis, and they also serve as hinges between the two" (Harnisch et al. 2011, 2). In my theoretical framework, introducing the concept of role serves three purposes:

⁶⁵ When de facto states secured support of a patron, they began to be seen as pawns in the game of big powers. For instance, claims that Russia is creating a cordon sanitaire made of dependent de facto states were made early on (Rywkin 1995).

1. It bridges the gap between the actor and the system (structure) and allows us to scale-up discussions about ontological security to the state-level.
2. It operationalizes the concept of identity so that it is possible to show how states, drawing on their identity traits (traditions, social norms, notions of honour), put these into practices as temporary *identifications*, which constitute a role.
3. It serves as the foundation for the concept of geopolitical role, which considers both ideational and material aspects drawing on the tradition of Critical Geopolitics.

The main drawback of the Constructivist approach to IR (and in particular its European version) is that by putting the emphasis on the non-material entities, such as identity, interest and interpretation, relations between states (understood as socially constructed) become detached from their material environment: the territorial reality in which state exist. Although Wendt's constructivism does not reject material explanations for state behaviour, it argues they are insufficient, and that ideational analysis is also required, which is what then the focus of his analysis becomes. If realism overplays the role of territory, its size, natural resources, size of population etc., constructivism underplays it. Therefore, Wendt's approach has to be corrected. This is done through drawing on two traditions later on in the thesis: empirical constructivists⁶⁶ (who have criticized Wendt) and Critical Geopolitics⁶⁷ (which has reaffirmed the importance of territory vis-à-vis post-modernists while criticized the modernist view of territory as given and objective).

Although the term 'geopolitical role'⁶⁸ is used by policy practitioners and the media⁶⁹, there is no single definition of the term in academia. As written before,

⁶⁶ For an overview of constructivist empirical research see Finnemore (2001).

⁶⁷ The main works in this relatively recently emerged, but quickly developing field are: Toal (1996); Dalby and Toal (1998); Agnew (2003); Dodds, Kuus and Sharp (2013); Ingram and Dodds (2016).

⁶⁸ The concept of geopolitical role is 'softer' than the concept of geopolitical position in terms of suggesting influence rather than determinism and allowing for a degree of flexibility; de facto states take up different roles, change and combine them. In the following chapter, de facto states are examined more closely from the point of view of their engagement with other actors in the international community; as actors (conducting their own foreign policy) and as contested territories (being the object of recognised states' foreign policies).

⁶⁹ Nicos Anastasiades, the President of the Republic of Cyprus recently gave a speech on the Geopolitical Role of Cyprus.

the concept designates a role that de facto states, influenced by ideational (state identity) and material (territoriality) factors, can play in foreign policy.⁷⁰ One can read about specific roles de facto states play: contested territories, zones of influence, pawns, small states, linchpins, power brokers, etc. – yet their geopolitical roles have never been defined and elaborated.

The distinction between identity and role does not mean that identity is static, and role is dynamic: “there are many ways to be agentic, including choosing rationally, matching appropriately, or varying a performative act.” (Mitzen 2006, 344). A state can therefore simply and automatically react to other actions, but it can also perform a role. The degree to which its actions are merely reactions to the actions of others or there is more planning and statecraft (Isachenko 2012) involved, is influenced by the state’s physical and ontological security, which in turn affects its margin of freedom of action. Just as the relation between identity and interaction is dialectical, so is the relationship between identity and role: “for a role to constitute an actor and motivate behaviour over time, it must be expressed in behaviour *and* that behaviour must be recognised by others as fulfilling the role.” (Mitzen 2006, 358) The role the state is playing must be credible – be recognised as such by others. Mitzen recognises the necessity of role to explain identity and interaction, but her conceptual development remains limited. When she states that “ideally, internally held role identities and externally recognised roles correspond, but as security dilemmas persist, by definition they will not,” (Mitzen 2006, 359) her terminology is confusing. It’s not exactly clear what she means by “internally held role identities” as role is something that is always external – the role only exists for the other (Turner 1956, 316). She claims that “states do not have the final say in whether they are security-seekers; other states play a crucial role” (Mitzen 2006, 357). I challenge that: states do have a final say in which role they play, but their success in playing it is determined by the environment and other actors. To sum up: roles that states play should be understood as external, directed at other states, decided by the state in question,

⁷⁰ The concept of geopolitical role allows us to conceive of different foreign policy approaches that de facto states adopt, in the context of territorial as well as more subjective (representation) and reflexive (self-representation) factors. It also allows to group together common characteristics and acts as a tool for comparing foreign policies of de facto states.

but their success is ultimately determined by other states. Mitzen (2006, 357) also claims that roles “locate and define the individual with respect to a social context; they are clusters of practices that constitute actors as objects of social experience (the ‘Me’).” Instead, I argue that roles do not locate and define the individual with respect only to social, but also the physical context. An actor in the theatre interacts with other actors, but also with the stage and the scenery. In playing out their geopolitical roles, the states locate and define themselves with respect to their geopolitical position and other states. However, before examining the concept of geopolitical role in more detail, I look at how role theory has been used in IR and how I can draw on that in my research:

“There is an antecedent literature on roles in foreign policy analysis (FPA), international relations theory and social science theory proper. The concept of ‘role,’ originally developed by sociologists, deals with the assumptions and values individuals bring to their interactions with others. Depending on who those others are, in what relationship they stand with the individual under consideration, and in what specific social context the interactions take place, those roles differ; individuals thus are regularly considered to play multiple roles” (Turner 2001, 1).

I define geopolitical role as a set of behaviours exhibited by a certain political entity in international politics, which reflects its position, importance and ability to project power and exert influence. This is in turn influenced by material-territorial factors, such as physical location, size, climate, topography, demography, natural resources, and technological factors that determine its strategic value for other (national, regional or global) players in international politics. The geopolitical role thus depends on geographical factors as well as on subjective perception and interpretation of these factors (strategic importance ascribed to them) by themselves and other political entities.⁷¹

Using the concept of geopolitical role also allows us to account for change in the structure/agency equilibrium and enables us to study de facto states as changing

⁷¹ To give an example of Kosovo, a peripheral region with little strategic importance is in Serbian media consistently referred to as the 'heart of Serbia' due to perceived historical and cultural importance for Serbian identity.

entities (as *geopolitical role* can be played, and one is not condemned to it – or blessed with it – which is the case of the concept of *geopolitical position*) and to emphasize the process over a snapshot of a point-in-time. This is important when comparing de facto states as it enables us to identify trends and predict future developments, therefore increasing the relevance of the research.

Although it is important to reaffirm the importance of the spatial dimension of politics, one must conceive of the relationship between space and politics as a two-way (Critical Geopolitics) rather than a one-way (Classical Geopolitics) relationship (Agnew 2009, 2). I understand geopolitics not just in the sense of the impact of geography on politics, but also vice versa – the impact of politics on geography, or as Toal (1996) put it, “the politics of writing space”. Although geopolitical role is largely influenced by geographical variables, these are always mediated through cultural categories, which in turn construct geography through identity politics – from naming places to drawing maps and building memorials. It is important to point out that in Toal’s work (as well as in the works of other scholars working in the tradition of Critical Geopolitics) the political nature of geography is perceived through a linguistic turn and defined in terms of discourse, narratives, meanings, which is analogous to how identity is seen by the European version of Constructivism. Instead, I want to define it in terms in which North American Constructivism would, i.e. in terms of the importance of social norms and identities in the construction of geography with a research agenda of explaining relationships between de facto state and other actors through examining the interplay of identity and territoriality. It is through this understanding, offered by critical geopolitics and adjusted to fit my specific focus that I can establish the link between the territorial and the ethno-political (identity) nature of conflicts in de facto states.⁷²

To paraphrase Karl Marx (2008), states “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” These ‘inherited’ circumstances include everything from physical environment in

⁷² The complex relationship between (territorial) security and (national) identity in the context of EU integration was explored by Kuus (2007).

which a state is situated (territory), to its social environment (predominant norms, values, and routines of interactions transmitted from the past) and the interplay of the two.⁷³ A de facto state is composed of population and territory. Its state identity consists of national identity⁷⁴ and geopolitical identity and geopolitical role draws on both. In defining national identity, I draw on Morin & Paquin (2018, 261) who define it as “a socially constructed image that a political community uses to portray itself. It is made up of a set of elements, including constitutive norms, comparative categories, collective aspirations and cognitive references” I examine each of these four categories in Chapter 4.

A geopolitical role develops when policy makers look at and interpret material-territorial factors through the prism of their perceptions. These perceptions differ from individual to individual, but they are collectively shaped (I develop this further in Chapter 4) by national identity, understood by Morin & Paquin (2018, 261) as consisting of four elements: constitutive norms, comparative categories, collective aspirations and cognitive references. In the case of Abkhazia these elements consist of norms, values, traditions and a sense of honour incorporated in the informal code of conduct ‘apswara’. Furthermore, every identity is relational and the perceptions of Abkhazian policy-makers are relational too, shaped by the comparative categories of kin, diaspora, friend, foe as well as considerations about the precarious demographic situation of the Abkhaz domestically. Furthermore, the prism is shaped by anxieties and the experiences of stigma, shame, and isolation.

Geopolitical roles are not as much developed as they develop. The reason for this is that many of the abovementioned elements that constitute the prism

⁷³ This interplay between the geographical (territory) and social (interaction) environment can be explored through the concept of boundedness. “The bounded character of states makes them ‘containers,’ enabling a government to concentrate its allocative and authoritative resources, thus increasing its administrative power (Giddens 1985: 13) – even if those resources have recently been undercut by Globalization.” (Ferguson 2003, 9). Furthermore, “it is the boundedness of a state that makes government such a ‘weighty actor,’ and social geography within those bounds structures how that weight is thrown around” (Ferguson 2003, 10). The boundedness of a state is in its essence territorial boundedness – a state’s geostrategic position, its resources etc., which influence which geopolitical roles it can play.

⁷⁴ National identities are partly a result of the roles states play(ed): France’s identity still reflects the role of a great power it once played, while Switzerland’s neutrality identity still reflects its smallness and precarious geopolitical position.

through which decision-makers interpret material-territorial factors, are subconscious. For example, policy-makers may be affected by the siege mentality stemming from Abkhazia's isolation by the international community and overdependence on Russia. During my interviews, 'siege mentality' was never mentioned by my interviewees as a factor in their decision-making. Yet their often emotional responses to the questions related to the international status of Abkhazia and the firm belief in the righteousness of their cause (which was sometimes emotional, such as when they claimed that "recognition does not really matter", is "not that important", and that "it is enough to have recognised ourselves, and that we were recognised by Russia"), point to 'siege mentality' being a factor in how they interpret the empirical reality they inhabit.

As I have argued before, leaning on Isachenko's research (2012), post-Soviet de facto states do not act strategically due to limitations of size, resources and status. However, despite not being able to fundamentally change the environment in which they operate, they are capable of tactical adaptation, which is what playing a geopolitical role comes down to. Playing geopolitical roles is partly a result of policy makers' subconscious interpretations of material-territorial factors through the prism of their perceptions and partly conscious tactical adaptations and reactions to threats and opportunities in their environment. The prerequisites for role play are therefore: the presence of objective conditions that enable the role⁷⁵ (such as occupying territory that is a natural strategically important location – 'chokepoint', or through which leads the best transit route for natural resources, or possessing such resources themselves); a specific subconscious interpretation of material-territorial factors based on national identity; and policy-makers' conscious tactical adaptations to threats and opportunities in the environment.

My taxonomy of geopolitical roles helps make sense of the plethora of foreign policy behaviours of de facto states by grouping them into six categories and classifying them according to common characteristics. As such, it is more a

⁷⁵ Extending the dramaturgical metaphor further, these objective conditions are to the de facto state what the stage set is to an actor. An actor without the stage, set design, costume, lighting, and an audience can no more play a role than a de facto state can play a geopolitical role without having some predispositions to do so.

heuristic device that helps us understand foreign policy of de facto states than an explanatory tool for foreign policy outcomes. Nevertheless, as the abovementioned examples of the different roles played by Abkhazia at different times suggest, Abkhazia – an internationally unrecognized state with a population of mere 200.000 and few natural resources - was occasionally able to ‘punch above its weight’ by tactically making use of opportunities that presented itself to it. From compelling Georgia to keep its military expenses high, preventing from joining the EU and NATO, to influencing Russian political elites, complying with Russian sanctions against Turkey in anticipation of future benefits, and finally, creating ‘facts on the ground’ that favour the status quo. However, Abkhazia did not achieve all this alone and benefitted from strong and overt Russian support since the early 2000s. It also did not always manage to achieve the desired policy outcome by playing a geopolitical role. For instance, it overestimated the importance of its geographical position for the Olympic games in Sochi and the high hopes of large Russian investments never materialized. To give another notable example, it failed to convince the international community that it has ‘earned’ recognition. This shows that roles do not have a predetermined outcome but depend on how realistic the goals they aim for are, how well the roles are played, and how the role-playing is accepted by the audience. To sum up, geopolitical roles are both internally driven and based on external perceptions. Their success depends on the alignment of the two.

Since post-Soviet de facto states lack ‘social capital’, they draw on the resources from physical environment. They attract patrons with offers to extract their resources and use their territory for transit. They rent-out strategically important locations for their patrons to establish military bases and offer them sea and airspace access for military purposes. In other words, they try to maximize physical and economic security, while maintaining ontological security through playing different geopolitical roles:

1. *Divider*: they can be used by other states in enforcing the *divide et impera* policy. They can be a source of conflict and instability, preventing the countries involved in the conflict from fully developing by requiring them to

keep military expenditures high. Nagorno-Karabakh claimed by Armenian and Karabakh is a case in point.

2. *Middle man*: play an important role in extraction and transit of natural resources, in the case of post-Soviet unrecognised states especially oil and gas pipelines. In some cases, they also possess their own natural resources (copper and gold in Nagorno Karabakh, timber and coal in Abkhazia) or important infrastructure (steel and weapons production in Transnistria).
3. *Tollman*: due to topographical features, such as mountain ranges or dense forests⁷⁶ act as strategically important locations – 'chokepoints', for instance military corridors, mountain passes, river crossings or coastal straights. Examples include Lachin corridor connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh and Roki Tunnel connecting North and South Ossetia.
4. *Extorter*: secure benefits (aid, investment) in turn for their compliance. A case in point are past and would-be unrecognised states, which have declared independence, but were forced or convinced to renounce it. Gagauzia made a lucrative deal with Moldova, whereas Chechnya was reincorporated into Russia, who then invested heavily in the republic.
5. *Keeper of the status quo*: delaying regional integration. Transnistria is a major concern in Moldova's aspirations to join the EU, as are Abkhazia and South Ossetia for Georgia.
6. *Emulator*: they attempt to emulate recognised states and adopt international democracy and human rights standards, differentiating themselves from their parent states in order to gain recognition.

Each unrecognised state can play different roles at different times or even combine elements of several roles. As will be shown in Chapter 7, Abkhazia has played the role of the middle man, keeper of the status quo and emulator at different times.

⁷⁶ A predominant part of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as a substantial part of Kosovo are mountainous and densely forested, making the terrain ideal for asymmetric warfare.

The concept of geopolitical role highlights the fact that state is both an actor as well as a structure, which does not exist separate from sub-state actors and elites that rule it: “what is very real about ‘the state’ is the myth of its independent existence. Belief in the state is acceptance of being ruled. The idea of the state legitimates the compulsory control of a population by a political elite” (Ferguson 2003, 9). People are ruled by the elites in the name of the state and not the other way around. To understand how the state works and how it acts, one must understand how the elites perceive the situations in which a state finds itself in and how they take decisions based on these perceptions and interpretations. The concept of geopolitical role can thus be put to use by looking at how policy elites interpret and relate to the wider geopolitical context and how this affects the interaction of de facto states through foreign policy.

Before proceeding to develop an integrated theoretical framework, it is important to clarify the relationship between a state’s identity and its role(s). This is far from straight-forward as they are “closely intertwined in the work of most researchers, but hardly ever clearly defined and related to each other” (Harnisch et al. 2011, 9). This confusion is compounded by the fact that scholarship on the matter differentiates between several kinds of identities and roles: national self-image (Hirshberg 1993), national role conception (Holsti 1970), and state (corporate, type, collective, and national) identity (Wendt 1994). Harnisch et al. (2011, 8) distinguish between *role conceptions*, defined by the decision makers, *role enactment*, which is how these conceptions manifest in foreign policy behavior, and *role adaptation* – referring to “changes of strategies and instruments in performing a role” (Harnisch et al. 2011, 10). Importantly, Breuning (2011, 26) conceptualises roles as having ideational as well as material elements (I claim the same and emphasize this through my concept of geopolitical role):

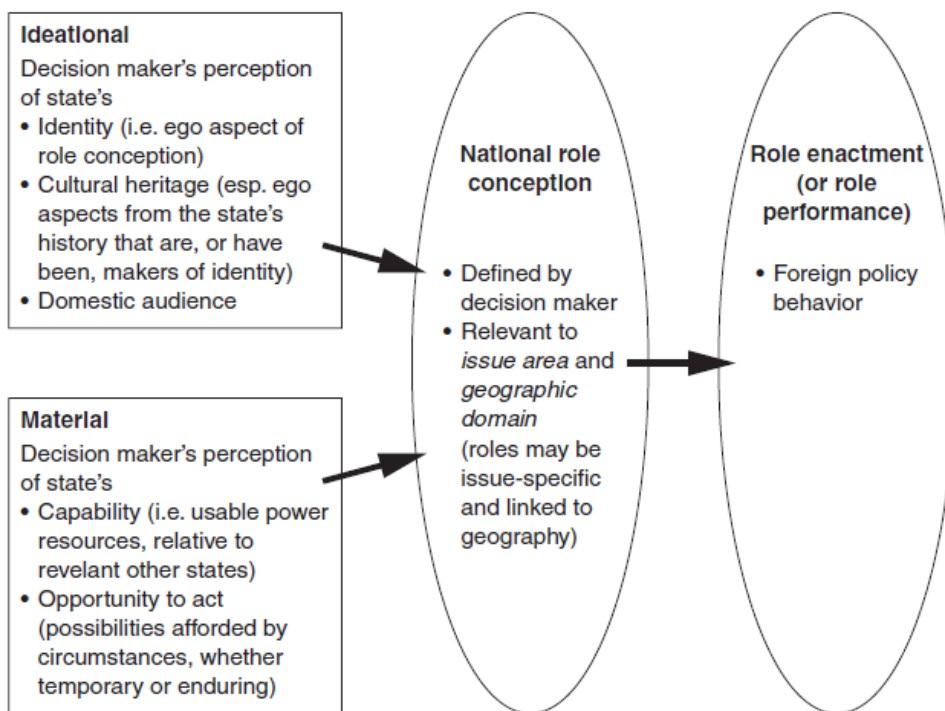


Figure 2.2 Role Theory as a Cognitive Model of the Agent-Structure Relationship.

The relationship between identity and role is easier to disentangle through an example: “Think of the aspiring actor who waits tables. He may see himself as an actor, and take classes, audition and talk constantly about theater. But until he gets the breakthrough role, in an important sense he cannot ‘be’ an actor. There is simply no way for us to know him as such; to society he is a waiter. Moreover, if his acting attempts are poorly received, over time he may become attached to the waiter identity, because that is the identity his daily routines actually sustain” (Mitzen 2006, 347–348). As the metaphor illustrates, identity is therefore a singularity, something internally held, and exists independently from the multiple roles the subject can play, but at the same time is related to the role and influenced by whether role-playing is accepted or not. There can thus be a tension between role conception and role enactment in a way that “changes in roles or role sets are important determinants for both *role enactment* and *identity formation*” (Harnisch et al. 2011, 9). Krotz and Sperling (2011, 9) have concluded that the smaller the number of roles an actor performs, the more likely it is that these roles shape the identity of that actor. To further clarify the relationship between identity and role in international relations, it is useful to look at McCourt’s

research in which he asked whether Britain reinvaded the Falklands because of its identity or was this required by the role it played in international politics. According to him, “Britain’s decision to reinvade the Falkland Islands is incomplete without taking into consideration the roles that served to give meaning to Britain’s actions. Britain’s principled sense of Self was brought into doubt by the invasion, its ontological security threatened, but the way in which it could affirm its identity was crucially dependent on the international social context of its response” (McCourt 2011, 1619–1620). A role is more than a way of signalling and performing the identity that the actor identifies with or aspires to. Role is not simply a way identity manifests externally, in a given social context, but also a way of affirming identity and providing it with meaning (McCourt 2011, 1599).

Developing an integrated approach

As existing approaches to de facto states each by themselves do not offer a good theoretical basis to answer my research question and IR theory does not have a coherent approach I could use, I needed to introduce new concepts to examine how interpretations of non-recognition influence the foreign policy interactions between de facto states and recognised actors: state identity, ontological security and geopolitical role. Although I have, in some places, identified the links between them, I now bring these concepts into a coherent theoretical framework that bridges the Realist-Constructivist divide and provides an explanatory basis for my research.

One of the most notable attempts to bridge the opposition between Realism and Constructivism is Barkin’s (2003) effort to reconcile constructivist normative transformation with realist conception of power. To do so, he proposes a realist infusion into Constructivism dominated by liberalism and idealism. Barkin’s work is particularly relevant to my research, because how de facto states interpret non-recognition (Constructivist focus on interpretation) affects their interaction with other actors, but the interpreting process itself depends on considerations that consider physical and ontological security as well as wider geopolitical considerations (Realist focus on power derived from material capabilities). This calls for detachment from idealism and a greater consideration of material factors

(although 'socialised' through the concept of geopolitical role, which is performed by policy elites interpreting the wider geopolitical context). It also calls for "dissociating constructivism from the liberal tradition" (Jackson 2004, 337), which means shifting the focus from norms that facilitate cooperation towards routines that sustain the security (which is again both material and ideational – physical and ontological) of de facto states.⁷⁷

The infusion of Realism need not go too far, of course as it would bring us back to the starting point. The subjective nature of non-recognition (which lends itself to interpretation and affects interaction), the constructed, changing and interaction-dependent nature of identity, the conceptualisation of security as both physical and ontological, and of geopolitical role as (although rooted in territoriality) socially constructed all have to be maintained. However, this does not mean that the Realist notions of power and conflict are incompatible and have to be rejected. They can be maintained but have to be reconceptualised from substantive to relational categories. Power does not simply manifest itself in the ability to preserve physical security and project influence, but also in the ability to preserve ontological security and successfully perform geopolitical roles with the aim of increasing de facto independence in the context of non-recognition. Conflict is not an inherent property of the international system, but a relation, which emerges in a specific context, such as the conflicts between parent and de facto states in the post-Soviet context.

As Ejdus (2017, 1), warns, ontological security should not be considered the opposite of physical security in the sense of being immaterial, while the latter is material: "Extant scholarship on ontological security in international relations has focused on the significance of social environments for state identity. In this article, I argue that material environments also provide an important source of ontological security for states." Instead, ontological security is tied to sustaining the identity through interaction and routines (which can be and are material), while physical security is tied to defending its territory and population (which are as socially

⁷⁷ The departure from Liberalism is even more necessary when it comes to post-Soviet de facto states, which are embroiled in bitter political conflicts with their parent states. While Liberalism can explain well the cases of state cooperation, Realism offers the best explanatory framework for understanding conflict.

constructed as they are material). Critical Geopolitics has long stressed that the territory is not some dead natural thing that exists independently, but that it is 'written' – it depends on the subjects that inhabit it, contest it, fight over it, and talk about it. I define geopolitical role of de facto states more narrowly as a set of foreign policy behaviours aimed at external actors (parent and patron state as well as the international community) with the aim of preserving both ontological and physical security of the state, maximizing its margin of political independence and economic prosperity. I argue that certain geopolitical factors can compensate for unrecognised states' lack of recognition and allow them to 'punch above their weight' (Edis 1991; Björkdahl 2007; Jakobsen 2009), much like some small states (in particular the Scandinavian ones) do, partly through playing geopolitical roles.

I expect these elements (material and ideational) and the core concepts (state identity, ontological security and geopolitical role) of my approach to interact in various ways. First, I expect the policy elites to be very conscious of the geopolitical context and internal developments in the de facto state and to make connections between the two.⁷⁸ Second, I expect policy elites to have a strong interest in preserving the state identity (supported by nation-building and state building practices), to consider ontological security as important and see foreign policy as one of the ways to preserve it.⁷⁹ Third, I expect policy elites to understand the geopolitical interests other actors have in their territory and resources and to know which roles they can play in order to preserve (or even increase) their de facto independence.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ For example, the NGOs in post-Soviet de facto states, especially the ones of which the patron state is Russia (which exerts significant political and cultural influence over them), are often branded as 'foreign agents', reflecting the belief that their efforts to bring about social and political change (internal developments) are supported by Western powers (primarily the EU and the US) and motivated by their geopolitical ambitions.

⁷⁹ For example, policy elites in post-Soviet de facto states are very proud of their state identity, which they have preserved through armed struggle and weary of over-dependence on their patron. In Abkhazia the fight for independence was largely seen as a struggle to preserve their national identity and see the growing Russian influence as a threat to it (for instance by the use of Russian language as a lingua franca, strong presence of Russian in culture and media). Foreign policy is one of the tools used to prevent re-incorporation into the parent state (and risk assimilation) both through seeking recognition and engagement, and to curb (legislation that prevents non-Abkhazians from buying land) and balance (multi-vector foreign policy) the influence of the patron state.

⁸⁰ For example, although Abkhazia depends on Russia for security, there is a growing sense among the policy elites sense that Russia should pay more for being allowed to keep military bases on its territory (role of extortioner).

My theoretical approach to the study of foreign policy of de facto states fills the gaps in two bodies of literature: it draws on IR theory that has had very little to say about de facto states (gap in IR theory) and on existing literature on de facto states, which has not explored issues of state identity and the meaning of non-recognition (gap in de facto states literature). It builds on both, but constructs a framework based on concepts of state identity, ontological security and geopolitical role to better understand the linkage of material and ideational, physical and ontological, territorial and role factors, in the interaction between de facto states and recognised actors.

Conclusion

This chapter clarified and elaborated the research puzzle and developed the theoretical framework of the thesis. Departing from the research question on how interpretations of non-recognition influence the foreign policy interactions between Abkhazia and Russia, the EU and the US, I have taken stock of state-of-the-art in literature, identified its major contributions and gaps relevant to my project, and proposed ways of addressing them. I then defined my key concepts: identity, ontological security and geopolitical role, followed by an examination of the intersections and interactions between the concepts to connect them into a single theoretical framework that builds bridges between the Realist and Constructivist theories of IR. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion on how my theoretical framework can be applied to the study of the foreign policy interaction of de facto states (further discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 7) and what forms of explanation I expect this approach to yield.

My theoretical framework lends itself well to qualitative empirical research. Therefore, I expect to be able to demonstrate the interaction of the three aforementioned elements of my approach, test my hypotheses and answer my research question through process tracing and elite interviewing. Process tracing is an appropriate method to examine the evolution of de facto states' and recognised actors' foreign policy. Examining policy documents can uncover narratives that sustain state identity and institutional routines that preserve ontological security in de facto states and the influence of interpretation of status

on engagement of actors who engage with them. Interviews with policy elites are an appropriate method to tease out the important factors that shape policy elites' (in both de facto states and recognised actors) interpretations of non-recognition. I discuss the application of the theoretical framework to the case study of Abkhazia and the methodology in more detail in Chapter 3.

I expect my thesis to yield two main types⁸¹ of explanation.⁸² The explanation of foreign policy interaction between de facto states will likely be *ideational*: dependent on the interpretation of non-recognition and 'man made' – "the consequences of 'resolved contingencies', meaning that it must have been possible at some point for a different set of ideas or institutions to be in place" (Daigneault & Béland 2015, 387). I expect the explanation of the interpretation (which factors influence it and how) of non-recognition to be *institutional*: "based on rationality under constraints" - the logic of position (Daigneault & Béland 2015, 387) and particular. That said, I believe the strongest explanation in the sense of causal relationship to emerge between the ideational (elements of state identity) and material factors (wider geopolitical considerations) and the interpretation of non-recognition. The explanation of how the interpretation of non-recognition affects foreign policy will likely be more interpretative than causational. To summarize, I expect my thesis to contribute to explaining how non-recognition is interpreted and explaining how the interpretations of non-recognition influence foreign policy interactions between de facto state and recognised actors.

⁸¹ Parsons (2007) discusses four types of explanation in political science: institutional, ideational, structural and psychological. He maps these along two dimensions – general/particular and position/interpretation. Institutional explanations are made from position and are particular, ideational are made from Interpretation and are particular, structural are made from position and are general and psychological are made from interpretation and are general. For a detailed analysis see Parsons (2007) and Daigneault and Béland (2015).

⁸² "To 'explain' involves making a statement about why something has occurred, by contrast with how it occurred or what it is" (Brady and Collier 2004, 288).

Chapter 2: Introduction to the case study

“Here's a map of the Byzantine Empire, here is Absilly - they are marked not as a territory of the Roman Empire in 211 AD. That is, they were considered by the Romans in the 3rd century, as a separate state. Absilly, Abkhazian tribes. So, the beginning of the Abkhaz statehood, begins precisely in this period”
– Interview with Alik Gabelia

Introduction

As has been established in the preceding chapter, one of the under-researched aspects of de facto states has been the meaning that they attach to non-recognition and how this affects their behaviour. In furthering this understanding, this chapter serves two purposes. First, it introduces the historical context, which is then referred back to in the empirical chapters. As this is an in-depth single-case study, understanding the history is crucial. Because my research puts emphasis on identity and culture, honour and *apswara* (explored further in Chapter 4), it is unavoidable to understand the context of their emergence and their relevance in different historical periods. The history of Abkhazia is contentious, and historiography has been a battlefield for Georgian and Abkhaz history scholars for decades before the escalation of ethnic tensions that led to the 1992–1993 war. As confirmed in the empirical chapters and explored further in Chapter 7, history matters, and ontological security concerns have a long history that predates the current conflict, stemming from the fears of annexation, overdependence, and marginalization as well as the corresponding concerns to preserve their physical and ontological security.⁸³

⁸³ As these fears are an important part of Abkhazia's history and identity, and continue to shape its foreign policy, it is worth explaining where they come from, why they exist and what their implication is for the foreign policy of Abkhazia. As the historical account in this chapter demonstrates, Abkhazians have been, throughout parts of modern history, subject to assaults on their territory and on their identity. Throughout its history, Abkhazia repeatedly saw its lands conquered and foreign rule established after periods of relative autonomy: it was incorporated into the Georgian Kingdom in 11th century, conquered by the Russian Empire in the late 19th

Second, the chapter provides information about the empirical scope of the research, including a discussion on case selection and its justification, time frame of my research and the expectations. I present my case selection of Abkhazia in terms of critical and extreme/deviant case among the population of de facto states. While a critical case allows for exploring if and why it stands out among de facto states in terms of foreign policy interaction, choosing it as an extreme/deviant case, helps to better understand post-Soviet de facto states as a group (what they share and how Abkhazia differs from them). I argue that despite not being a typical case, Abkhazia has enough in common with other de facto states that some external generalizability of conclusions can be expected (further discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 7). Looking at the other side of the interaction, I have chosen Russia, the EU and the US as the actors with which Abkhazia has most significant and meaningful engagement. In terms of timeline, I will be looking at the period between October 12, 1999 and November 24, 2014. I present my reasons for both choices below. Finally, I briefly discuss my research expectations which already anticipate some fieldwork and methodological choices (Chapter 3) and possible findings (Chapter 7) and as such link the theoretical-historical part of my dissertation (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2) to the methodological part (Chapter 3).

Historical context

Abkhazia is a land with an ancient history with “Abkhazians tracing their lineage to the Hittites, a tribe that ruled over Anatolia in the second and third centuries

century and incorporated into the Georgian SSR in 1931. In this context, a fear of being swallowed up territorially by Georgia or Russia, annexed or re-incorporated respectively, is understandable. Perhaps an even greater danger is that of being robbed of their identity, a fear that exists because of the historical experience of both Russification and Georgianisation, as shown in this chapter. This fear is nowadays most closely associated with a concern for the preservation of Abkhaz identity in the face of overdependence on Russia and the precarious internal demographic situation in which the Abkhaz make up barely half of the population of the titular republic. To sum up, Abkhazians have three main fears: the fear of being attacked and swallowed up by Georgia, the fear of being turned into a protectorate by Russia, and the fear of being marginalised in their own republic by the minorities that constitute half of the population (without counting the expelled Georgian refugees). The implication of these fears for the foreign policy of Abkhazia will become clearer in the empirical chapters and in the Interaction between the ‘isolation’ and ‘engulfment’ section of Chapter 7. Here, it suffices to state that as a result of these fears, Abkhazia’s foreign policy has vacillated between the strategies of multi-vector foreign policy and patron reliance, and the defence mechanism of self-isolation.

BC.” (George 2009, 99). It is not, however, the intention and is well beyond the scope of this thesis to present an all-encompassing account of Abkhaz history. Instead, the account focuses mainly on the Soviet and post-Soviet history of Abkhazia, especially on periods and events that are relevant to understanding Abkhazia’s de facto statehood between 1999 and 2014 (the time-frame of the thesis) and in particular with reference to my theoretical framework and the core concepts of identity, ontological security, and geopolitical role.

The Pre-Soviet period: origins of statehood

The kingdom of Colchis, which is subject to many legends, can be traced back to the 8th century BC. Scarce historical sources make it impossible to determine the exact location of the Colchian kingdom so Samegrelo (Mingrelia in Georgia), Krasnodar Krai (Russia) and Abkhazia vie for this ancient heritage (Sideri 2012, 263). In the first century AD, the territory of today’s Abkhazia came under the rule of the Romans, who held it until the fourth century AD. In medieval times, the territory changed hands between the Arab caliphate, the Byzantine Empire, and the Khazar Empire before uniting with the province of Imereti to form the Kingdom of Abkhazia in 780. This independent kingdom is seen by the Abkhaz as a precursor of the contemporary Abkhazia and legitimizes their striving for independence. The Kingdom of Abkhazia lasted until 1008, when it was incorporated into the Kingdom of Georgia. This period from 780 to 1008 AD was referred to during my fieldwork in Abkhazia by several interviewees (interviews with Alik Gabelia⁸⁴ and Gennady Gagulya⁸⁵) and can thus be judged to play an important role in self-perception and ontological security of Abkhazia.

The Shervashidze dynasty ruled the principality of Abkhazia until 1578, when it became a protectorate of the Ottoman Empire (Coene 2009, 148-9). Between the end of the sixteenth until the beginning of the nineteenth centuries Abkhazia was subjected to Islamisation and a part of the population converted to Islam

⁸⁴ Alik Gabelia was the Dean at the Faculty of History and International Relations, University of Sukhum/I at the time this interview was conducted.

⁸⁵ Gennady Gagulya was the Head of the Chamber of Commerce of Abkhazia at the time this interview was conducted. He died on September 8, 2018 as the serving Prime Minister of Abkhazia in a car accident while in the cortege of the official delegation of Abkhazia returning from Syria (which has recognised Abkhazia three months earlier).

(Souleimanov 2013, 117). While Abkhazia was being subordinated, the Shervashidzes asked the Russian Empire for assistance (Coene 2009, 149). The Russians slowly pushed the Ottomans south, so that by 1810 all the Georgian kingdoms, Abkhazia included, were under the Tsar. Despite becoming a Russian protectorate in 1810, Abkhazia's self-administration lasted until 1864, when it was revoked by the Russians, leaving it within the boundaries of Georgia (George 2009, 99). After land and taxation reforms, the Abkhaz revolted in 1866. During the crushing of the revolt and in the following years many Abkhaz, especially Muslims, emigrated *en masse* to the Ottoman Empire so that the ones left behind were mostly Christian. Coene (2009, 211) defines the people who were expelled – the *mahajirs* as those "who migrated (often forced) from the Northwest Caucasus (and Abkhazia) to Turkey and the Middle East. The term is derived from the Islamic word *hijra*, designating population movement triggered by the occupation by non-Muslims of Muslim territories and the unwillingness of Muslim communities to live under non-Muslim rule." The scale of the expulsion of the Abkhaz and Circassians is described by King (2008, 97): "A decade prior to the expulsions, there were perhaps 145,000 people living in the Abkhaz lands and another 315,000 Circassians belonging to various tribes, plus tens of thousands of other coastal and highland peoples. Yet at the time of the first general imperial census in 1897, there were only about 60,000 people living on the coasts of Circassia, and of those only 15,000 had been born there." Looking at the past it seems ironic that Russians are today seen in Abkhazia as protectors, while in 1860s most of the Abkhaz nation was either killed or expelled from the Russian Empire.⁸⁶ The *mahajirs* were the founders of Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey today (explored in Chapter 4). This episode also illustrates well the historical complexity of the Russian-Abkhaz relations, that were not always peaceful and friendly and that I explore further in Chapter 5.

⁸⁶ The term *mahajirs* primarily refers to Muslims who fled the Russian Empire's conquest of Caucasus to Turkey and the Middle East. While the conquest was completed by 1864 and most of the population expulsions happened in 1860s, they also occurred afterwards, for instance of those the Russians considered as collaborators in the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78) (Bgazhba and Lakoba, 2007, 236–240).

The Soviet period

During the Soviet period, often seen as monolithic today, Abkhazia's status changed several times, while its identity was both subject to persecution and to institutional entrenchment. The current conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia has its roots in this period and its conflicting tendencies. Five distinct periods can be distinguished: 1917–1921 (Abkhaz SSR), 1921–1931 (incorporation into Georgian SSR), 1931–1945 (Georgianisation), 1945–1980 (institutional entrenchment), and 1980-1991 (ethnic tensions).

Following the October revolution in 1917, Abkhazia adopted its own constitution and in May 1918 became part of the emerging North Caucasian Mountainous Republic. This was a turbulent period marked by "strife between various political splinter groups – pro-Russian Bolsheviks, pro-Turkish aristocrats, and pro-Georgian Socialists (Mensheviks) (Souleimanov 2013, 114). "Abkhazian leadership had friendly ties with the government in Moscow based on Bolshevik sympathies. When the Red Army led by Ordzhonikidze betrayed and occupied the independent Republic Georgia in February 1921, the Abkhaz leaders asked Lenin for an SSR status and received it. There was a problem however, because the SSR status was granted as a 'treaty republic' together with the SSR Georgia (Companjen 2010, 189). In Abkhazia fighting between Mensheviks and White forces raged during the civil war and offering it special status was a way of creating a buffer and managing the conflict at a contested border (King 2008, 189). Accordance of special statuses in Soviet Union was therefore more a decision that was based on making the territories governable and not a recognition of a separate identity. This kind of geopolitical gerrymandering and pressures on the identities of small nations has shaped the historical experience of the nations in the Caucasus and influenced their behaviour, including Abkhazia's choice of geopolitical roles through the playing of which it attempts to preserve its physical and ontological security.

In early 1930s, Stalin stopped the Soviet policy of indigenization (*korenizatsia*) and enforced political and economic centralization in USSR (Sideri 2012, 269). As a result of Stalinist territorial-administrative rearrangements, the status of

Abkhazia was downgraded to that of an autonomous republic (ASSR) within the Georgian SSR in 1931 (Coene 2009, 149). Abkhazia thus existed as an SSR (albeit a special 'treaty republic' together with the SSR Georgia) between 1921 and 1931, which is another historical period the Abkhaz point to when legitimizing their right to independent statehood. After Abkhazia was downgraded to an ASSR, "the Georgian language was declared the official language and ethnic Georgians were encouraged to live there. The many mixed marriages date from this period, as do the migration of Russians and Armenians to Abkhazia." (Companjen 2010, 189). It should be noted that during the rule of Stalin, the politics of USSR became intertwined with local politics in the Caucasus as several key people in the regime were from the region. Political allies and close associates Stalin (Georgian), Ordzhonikidze (Georgian) and Mikoyan (Armenian) were jokingly referred to as the "Caucasian Clique, while Lavrentiy Beria (a Georgian-Mingrelian, born in Merkheuli, Abkhazia) was a bitter rival of Nestor Lakoba (an Abkhaz) and had allegedly poisoned him.

Georgian historiography in 1930s represented the Kingdom of Abkhazia "as 'no more than a title for Georgian kings', whilst the ancestors of the Abkhaz themselves were described as a Georgian tribe with a Georgian dialect." (Marshall 2010, 240) and in 1960s Georgian historians had this to say on Abkhaz ethnogenesis, firmly denying the existence of the Abkhaz nation, and classifying them instead as a Georgian tribe: "Those whom we call Abkhazians are not Abkhazians. The Abkhazians were a Georgian tribe. The present Abkhazian are the descendants of Kabardeys and Balkars who migrated into Georgia in the mid-19th century" (Souleimanov 2013, 116). Although these views may persist today, they are limited to political fringes in Georgia. The Abkhaz were never able to mirror these claims and pronounce Georgians as an Abkhaz tribe, but they have developed a strong defence mechanism that involves presenting proofs of historical origins of the Abkhaz whenever Georgian-Abkhaz relations are discussed, as witnessed by the author in most interviews. This denial of existence continues to live on in the conflict as Georgia was reluctant to recognise the Abkhaz as a party to the conflict, claiming that the conflict is really between Georgia and Russia. The Abkhaz, on the other hand, aim to portray Georgia as little more than an instrument of American interests.

Abkhaz grievances during the Soviet period concerned the status of the region, but also the campaign of Georgisation which they viewed as a way of destroying their culture. "One of the reasons for this was that there had been a large influx of Georgians, Russians, Armenians and others. Whereas in 1886 (i.e. after many of them had left for Turkey) ethnic Abkhaz formed 42 per cent of the population, by 1959 this had been reduced to only 15 per cent" (Coene 2009, 149). The Gal/i region and major cities of Abkhazia were all predominantly Georgian. The two exceptions were the regions of Gudauta and of Tqvarchel(i) (Shesterinina 2014, 97). As part of this policy teaching the Abkhaz language was stopped and the language was given a Georgian alphabet (Coene 2009, 149). However, due to the location of Abkhazia and its status as the Soviet Riviera, where the USSR political elite had their dachas and spent summer vacations, Abkhazians had good connection to authorities in Moscow: "Moscow was regarded as the power which guaranteed that Tbilisi would act cautiously when face-to-face with the political, administrative, and demographic preponderance of Georgians." (Souleimanov 2013, 121). The Abkhaz authorities and intellectuals wrote frequent letters to Moscow complaining about the Georgianisation policy, but also the historiography that reduced the Abkhaz status as a titular nation (Shesterinina 2014, 113). Although these letters were mostly dismissed as nationalist, the status of Abkhaz language and cultural rights gradually improved, especially in the Brezhnev era (Souleimanov 2013, 130), while the percentage of the Abkhaz in leadership position rose, as the Soviet authorities tried to manage the conflict by redistributing power. While the demographic percentage of the Abkhaz in Abkhaz SSR has fallen to 17.9 in 1989, there was a marked increase in the percentage of the Abkhaz occupying leadership positions in administrative districts, from 42.9 percent of first secretaries to 50 percent by 1975. In a few years' time, the Abkhaz came to dominate 67 percent of the government minister positions and composed 71 percent of the Oblast committee department heads (George, 2009, 104). According to Souleimanov (2013, 130), this was an unprecedented situation in Soviet history considering the small demographic percentage of the Abkhaz in the autonomy. Georgians saw this as privileging the Abkhaz in Abkhazia and such a plan by Moscow's to weaken and undermine the Georgian state (Souleimanov 2013, 130).

Perhaps in response to perceived bias in the distribution of power towards the Abkhaz, by 1970s the Georgian historical discourse has changed and the Abkhaz were depicted as guests "[t]he cultivation of the myth of Georgia as the “hospitable mother” has consigned South Ossetians and the Abkhaz to the roles of mere guests who – only relatively recently within the context of the long history of Georgian statehood – have settled on Georgian territory, and from whom respect for the territorial integrity of the “host” country can be rightfully demanded (Coppitiers & Huysseune 2002, 96). Seen from this lofty perspective of “historical justice,” the separatist aspirations of these subordinate peoples have, therefore, practically no legitimacy at all. This is the source of the slogans that were commonly heard in the vocabulary of many nationalistically oriented Georgians during the 1980s and 1990s: “If you don’t like things in Georgia, go back to Iran” is what Ossetians heard in reference to their Iranian origin, while it was suggested to the Abkhaz that they move back to the North Caucasus, to Russia and their Adyghean fellow tribesmen” (Souleimanov 2013, 117-8). This has been mirrored by the Abkhaz by not only claiming that they are the original inhabitants of Abkhazia but that it is the Georgians who are the latecomers (Kvarchelia 1998).

Dissolution of the USSR

Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost (openness), which inadvertently encouraged nationalists, made the situation even worse. The ‘Abkhazian Letter’ of June 1988 and the petition of the ‘Abkhazian Forum’ of March 1989 addressed to the Soviet leadership forwarded claims to change the status of Abkhazia back to SSR, opening the door for secession from Georgia. This along with growing feeling of nationalism in Georgia and isolated inter-ethnic clashes led to the demonstrations in Tbilisi in April 1989. This was a watershed moment as the intervention of Soviet troops killed 19, leading to anger with the communist regime and even greater tensions (Coene 2009, 149). In Abkhazia, the political but also the economic situation were worsening quickly as tourist revenues and the lucrative export of local citruses and tea declined. This exacerbated ethnic fragmentation and forced people to take sides. Before, “Abkhazians had enjoyed the formal opportunity, when necessary, to approach the central authorities in Moscow – the ‘honest broker’ – to advance their complaints and push forward their age-old

emancipation agenda with respect to Tbilisi. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, that opportunity seemed to have melted away, both for Abkhazians and South Ossetians" (Souleimanov 2013, 95). With tensions rising and no way of defusing them in sight, the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia proclaimed Abkhazia a full union republic in August 1990. This move was condemned by the Georgian SSR, which in April 1991 itself declared independence from the Soviet Union and in February 1992 restored the constitution of the 1921 Democratic Republic of Georgia with Abkhazia within its borders (McCorquodale & Hausler 2010, 36). In June 1992, the Abkhaz president Ardzinba proposed a solution of confederation with Georgia, which was refused by the Georgian government. One month later Abkhazia discontinued the 1978 constitution (George 2009, 116), restored its 1925 constitution and thus proclaimed its independence again (Coene 2009, 149-150) and triggered the armed conflict (McCorquodale & Hausler 2010, 36).

The 1992–1993 war

Local clashes began between the Abkhaz and Georgians. Gamsakhurdia, who stirred tensions now tried to manage the crisis, but was ousted in a coup. In early 1992 the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of USSR Shevardnadze assumed power in Georgia but was unable to put a lid on growing calls for a military solution to the problems in Abkhazia (King 2008, 215-6). In August 1992, the Georgian National Guard and police intervened to restore order in Abkhazia (Coene 2009, 150), but the troops commanded by Kitovani did not stop at the border and invaded Abkhazia without Shevardnadze's permission, and occupied Sukhum/i in a few days. It is important to note that the context in which these events were taking place was one of uncertainty and instability, where Georgia in early 1990s came close to being a failed state losing nearly 18% of its territory due to the secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Even worse was that Georgia faced disobedience in Mingrelia, Gamsakhurdia's home region and in Adjara, ruled by Abashidze as a personal fiefdom. At its lowest point, the Georgian government administered barely two thirds of its internationally recognised territory (George, 2009, 108). What followed was a "vicious, ethnically based pillage, looting, assault and murder" by Georgian troops. Abkhaz cultural monuments, including the archives of the Abkhazian national museum and the properties of Sukhum/i

University, were destroyed. Secessionists fled Sukhum/i for their stronghold of Gudauta (Coene 2009, 150). There, Abkhazian troops were joined by hundreds of volunteers from the North Caucasus, including North Caucasian and Don Cossacks, some allegedly armed and equipped by the Russian army (Souleimanov 2013, 160-1). Together they were able to push back the ill-prepared Georgians, retake Sukhum/i in September, with Ochamchire/a and Gal/i falling to the secessionists soon afterwards. Atrocities were committed against the Georgian population, with about 200.000 Georgians fleeing the region. The latest ceasefire was concluded in December 1993 and has - despite major incidents in 1998⁸⁷ - been largely respected (Coene 2009, 150). The agreement brokered by Russia in May 1994 allowed for the deployment of CIS peacekeepers - in practice wholly Russian - to monitor the security zone along the border (King 2008, 215-6).

Interbellum 1993–1999

Russian position in the war was contradictory as it lent military and political support to both sides. After the war, Russia joined the CIS-enforced economic blockade against Abkhazia (George 2009, 199–120). Abkhazia's economic survival depended on smuggling through the ports of Gagra, Gudauta, Ochamchire/a, and Sukhum/i. It is estimated that 60–70 percent of Abkhazian trade took place at seaports and the rest by car transport, mostly along the Russian border but also through the Gal/i district, along the porous border with Georgia. The CIS blockade envisioned to push Abkhazia toward Georgia out of desperation failed as the blockade was not particularly effective. CIS countries, in particular Russia, did not fully implement the blockade and contraband still found its way into the region, fostering criminal groups on both sides of the Abkhazian-Georgian border (George, 2009, 133). In late 1990s and early 2000s Russians slowly became more consistent in their support for Abkhazia, allowing it to recover somewhat: ".../although the economic infrastructure in the conflict zones suffered extensive damage during the war, their relative bargaining

⁸⁷ On 11th April 1998, after months of low-level insurgency, Georgian guerrillas launched an attack against Abkhazia, injuring eight Russian servicemen, part of the CIS peacekeeping force (Fuller 1998).

position increased due to a growing consistency in Russian support. In the early and even late 1990s, Abkhazia specifically had complained about Russian pro-Georgian tactics, but by the early 2000s, the Russians had chosen a side" (George, 2009, 132). This new vector in Russian foreign policy endowed Abkhazians with optimism and on October 3rd, 1999 they organized a referendum in which the population had voted for an independent state after which they declared independence again (in 1992, when Abkhazia first declared independence, no referendum took place) (Companjen 2010, 189).

Factors, such as Putin's arrival in power in Russia in 1999, Saakashvili's Rose revolution in Georgia in 2003, were instrumental in this. Understanding the post-Soviet aftermath and the later shifts in regional realignments involving Abkhazia, Russia, the West, Georgia, and the North Caucasus (Chechnya), is key for understanding Abkhazia's foreign relations later. Especially important is the understanding that between 1991 and 1999, Russia's relationship with Abkhazia was mostly a function of its relationship with the above-mentioned actors. The next four sections therefore serve the purpose of providing the historical context for the reader as well as an orientation for situating the analysis in the empirical chapters (Chapter 4, 5, and 6).

Abkhazia in Russia's Caucasus conundrum

Relations between Russia and Georgia in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR were marked by Russia's disinterest in engaging with former Soviet republics. When Russia showed interest, Georgia refused to join the CIS and restored its pre-Soviet constitution, an act mirroring the Baltic states, giving the signal that Georgia was an "occupied territory" during the Soviet period. These kind of "restorationist" moves only worsened the problems with the legitimacy of the border since the borders of pre-Soviet states were different from those of the Soviet Republic (Toal 2017, 65). Meanwhile the Georgian-Abkhaz War was going on and accounts on Russia's role in it vary, with some (George 2009) arguing that Russia actively intervened on the Abkhaz side, while others (Hopf 2005) claim that Russia has either passively allowed fighters from the North Caucasus to come to Abkhazia or insist that Russia was not a unified political actor and its

military, sometimes even individual commanders, were not acting on orders based political decisions (*ibid.*, 226). Interestingly, Abkhazians too, saw Russia as biased against them (Wright et al. 1996, 143), since it supported Georgia's territorial integrity and sold arms to it. Nevertheless, Shevardnadze accused Russia of assisting Abkhazia (*ibid.* 52) but the defeat of the Georgian troops in Abkhazia and a rebellion in western Georgia forced Shevardnadze to ask Moscow for military assistance. He promised Yeltsin that Georgia will join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Georgia also gave Russia control over four Soviet-era military bases and access to its Black Sea ports. In return, Russia supplied Georgia's army with weapons, Georgian population with fuel, and provided protection for Georgian railway and port infrastructure. With Russian help, Shevardnadze was finally able to quell the rebellion of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and stay in power (Toal 2017, 101).

The last factor influencing Russian-Abkhazian relations in 1990s was the situation in Chechnya, which affected Russia's view of the situation in its 'Near Abroad' (and in particular in the Caucasus). Abkhazia, although geographically part of the South Caucasus, has culturally more in common with the North Caucasus (Hewitt 1999, 241). Since the beginning of the 19th century, the peoples of North Caucasus were fighting a common enemy – the Russian Empire, which was expanding southward and conquering their ancestral lands (Coene 2009, 126). In the vacuum that existed between the collapse of the Russian Empire and the consolidation of power by the Bolsheviks, from 1917 to 1920, existed the North Caucasian 'Mountain Republic'. In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples sought to restore this independent polity, proclaiming Sukhum/i to be its capital (Cornell 2002, 178). A voluntary formation of the peoples of the North Caucasus (Wright et al. 1996, 142) intervened on the side of Abkhazia to recapture Sukhum/i (Hopf 2005, 231-2). To the Russians, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples was "an illustration in microcosm of the dangers of replaying the regional dynamics of 1917–20" (Marshall 2010, 304). It fuelled fears that the Abkhaz might assist the Chechens in a potential military conflict with Russia. In the context of the 'parade of sovereignties' there were fears that separatism would then spread into other parts

of the Russian Federation. Even after Russia imposed sanctions on Abkhazia in late 1993, the neighbouring Russian republic of Krasnodar failed to respect it, while in August 1994 the governments of Russian republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan concluded Treaties of Friendship and Cooperation with the de facto government of Abkhazia. Such actions encouraged Abkhazia to believe “that Russia’s official nonrecognition was only de jure, not de facto” (Hopf 2005, 231–2). This also encouraged separatists in the North Caucasus, especially the Chechens who have already declared independence in 1991. Russia intervened in late 1994 but the Abkhaz did not return the favour and did not send help to Chechnya, making the Chechens deeply resentful and prompting them to improve relations with Tbilisi (Walker 1998, 3).

Russian-Abkhazian relations 1991–1999

It is perhaps the 1991–1999 period of Russian-Abkhaz relations that is the most poorly understood of any, with even some specialists in the field omitting wholesale the many fluctuations in Russian-Abkhaz relations, including a period in which no relations existed at all.

Gerrits and Bader (2016, 298), for example, write that “Russia has been the biggest supporter of Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the emergence of separatist conflicts in the two regions in the late 1980s” (Gerrits and Bader 2016, 298). While some support did come from a wide array of sources and actors, including Communist chauvinists in Russian security structures, especially officers with real estate in Abkhazia, Soviet hardliners, Russian nationalists, local Sochi mafia, and pan-Islamists from the North Caucasus (Derluguian 1998, 285), it is hard to attribute much support in this period to the Russian state. In addition, the Russian-led CIS embargo was enforced for several years between 1993 and 1997 (Walker 1998, 3), and officially in place until March 2008 (Toal and O’Loughlin 2016, 110). Consequently, it is hard to agree in the absolute with Gerrits and Bader (2016) that Russia has been the biggest supporter of Abkhazia since the outset of the conflict. While the Russian embargo of Abkhazia does not contradict some support coming from Russia, it warrants at least a distinction between the official actions of the Russian state and the unofficial and

independent actions of other actors in Russia.⁸⁸ A relative claim that Russia has been the biggest supporter of Abkhazia is, however, more feasible, and its disapproval would require pointing to a state that supported Abkhazia more since the start of the conflict. No state provided such support to Abkhazia although the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey did act as a lifeline for Abkhazia during the embargo. While Turkey, much like Russia, did not officially and actively support Abkhazia, it did little to stop black market trading. In 1990s first a bus, then a maritime connection was established between Trabzon and Sukhumi. Since 1994, the ferry named 'Ritza' made two journeys per week between the two cities, mostly fully booked. The line was shut down in 1996, when Turkey complied with the CIS embargo (Punsmann 2008, 78–79). Even after the embargo, communication and exchange of goods continued between Turkey and Abkhazia through diaspora intermediaries and Turkey continues to be Abkhazia's second biggest trade partner after Russia (Eissler 2013, 125). To conclude, neither the Russian nor the Turkish state provided much official support to Abkhazia but both at least tolerated some communications and support between Abkhazia and its supporters in Russia and Turkey, and at most facilitated these activities. The virtual inexistence of external state support makes Abkhazia an outlier among the post-Soviet de facto states as it initially had no patron state, owing its existence more to the weakness of Georgia than to its own strength or foreign support.

Although relations between Russia and Abkhazia improved from 1991 to 1999, this improvement was not linear and was more due to the change in Russia's other relationships and it is difficult to see any strategy in Russia's engagement of Abkhazia at the time. In the state in which Russia found itself throughout most of the 1990s, it would be perhaps too much to expect Russia to act strategically. We can, however observe that throughout the 1991-1999 period, Russia carefully balanced forces in the Caucasus and changed its support for different actors several times. In the spirit of 'divide and conquer', Russia opposed Georgia, the actor with the best relations with what it considered to be the biggest threat – Chechnya. Russia at least passively allowed North Caucasian fighters to save

⁸⁸ The extent of state control (and therefore the distinction between state and non-state actors) was not always clear in this period, making it even harder to make categorical statements regarding the extent of Russia's support of Abkhazia.

the existence of Abkhazia until its relations with Chechen separatists became threateningly close. In October 1993 it threw its weight behind Georgia and declared an embargo on Abkhazia (Hopf 2005, 231-2). In the course of the First Chechen War and the ensuing de facto Chechen independence, relations between Chechnya and Abkhazia soured, while Georgian-Chechen relations improved, so Russia changed positions again. Whether Russia's foreign policy reached strategic level or stayed confined to tactical responses, is a matter of discussion that far exceeds this scope of this thesis.⁸⁹

What is clear, however, is that Russia was at this time a Janus-faced actor, optimistically trying to integrate with the West, while bemoaning the loss of an empire and with it its ontological security, which depended on horizontal relationships with great powers (a loss of an arch-enemy is a huge loss indeed!), vertical relationships with its periphery, a sense of status and honour based on imperial past and alternative Soviet civilisation. Post-Soviet ontological insecurity is clearly manifested through nostalgia in which Abkhazia figures prominently. The 1991-1999 period of Russian-Abkhaz relations is poorly understood in part because the fluctuations in the relationship are not acknowledged, and in part because the foundations for the improvement of Russian-Abkhaz relationship remain poorly understood. I claim that a part of these foundations consists of Abkhazia's position in the imaginary of Russian elites, who have vacationed in Abkhazia for generations and have forged strong and lasting bonds with local elites.⁹⁰ To understand what Abkhazia means for Russia today, it is not enough to consider Russia's other relationships or Abkhazia's 'strategic value', but also its symbolic value. What does Abkhazia represent to Russia's political elites and why does it matter?

One of the symptoms of the turbulent and traumatic period as experienced by the population of Russia, is the nostalgia for Soviet Union, which is today being used

⁸⁹ Perhaps the closest Russia has come to strategic decisions, was in its 'base politics'. In 1995 it secured the right to maintain four military bases in Georgia, which were nevertheless closed once Georgia recovered and changed its foreign policy course (Nichol 2008, 114).

⁹⁰ The best example perhaps is that of Moscow's former mayor Yuri Luzhkov, the first Russian politician who recognised the independence of Abkhazia and who expanded his business into the de facto state many years before Russia's lifting of the economic embargo. Luzhkov was so open in his support for Abkhazia that the Georgian government eventually blacklisted him (Brokes 2018).

for political and foreign policy purposes with the Soviet past being celebrated increasingly openly, which is evident in how the Russian political elites use Soviet nostalgia, especially the struggle during the Second World War, to gain popular support (Hansen 2016, 367). Part of the Soviet nostalgia and the longing for the empire is also the longing for Abkhazia – a place of good memories for many Russians who vacationed there. The Abkhaz coast, although part of Georgia, was considered by Russians as “their Riviera”, with an important Russian military base and many dachas of high-ranking Russian generals (Companjen 2010, 182). Russian tourism in Abkhazia is not a Soviet but a much older phenomenon. In fact, famous cultural figures like Chekhov and statesmen like Stalin, chose to spend their summers in Abkhazia’s sub-tropical climate, enjoying its “pristine’ beauty” (Sideri 2012, 263). Nostalgia is often related to one's childhood, a sense of childhood security and innocence. It can have autobiographical elements (Dickinson & Erben 2006) or refer to an imagined place (Kalinina 2014; Velikonja 2009), never experienced by the nostalgic person or to an actual place idealised to become a 'paradise on earth' (Souleimanov 2013, 95). Soviet nomenklatura vacationed in Abkhazia with their children, many of whom would later become part of political elites in Russia and other post-Soviet republics. The relations between local Abkhaz political elites and vacationing political elites from Moscow was especially strong (Derluguian 1998, 262).⁹¹ According to Samokhvalov (2017, 176) “the Black Sea region retained a special status for Russian identity.” It was seen as “a sort of Promised Land”, the location of adventures for Putin, who associated the region with freedom, escapism, and exoticism (Samokhvalov 2017, 176). Childhood memories of family vacations of the elites in 1970s and 1980s are factors that contribute to Russians visiting Abkhazia today (Sideri 2012, 272). According to Sideri (2012, 266), Abkhazia was one of the places that played a crucial role in “the development of the ‘tourist gaze’ for generations of

⁹¹ This proximity between Moscow and Abkhaz elites is maintained through shared education. Gerrits and Bader (2016, 303) note that in Abkhazia “of the 19 highest-ranking persons holding positions in executive power (the Head of State and cabinet ministers), 12 have studied in either post-Soviet Russia or the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Nine of these 12 functionaries have studied in Moscow. This includes President Ankvab, who graduated from the Academy of Social Sciences of the Communist Party in 1987, Vice President Logua, who graduated from the Moscow State Automobile and Road Technical University in 1995, and Prime Minister Lakerbaya, who is a graduate from the same Moscow institution.”

Russian and Soviet travelers.”⁹² It is not at all surprising if many Russian politicians and policy makers who have spent parts of their childhood vacationing in Abkhazia, had fond, nostalgic memories of it. Tourism keeps this nostalgia of Abkhazia as the lost oasis in the Russian imperial imaginary, alive for an older generation of Russian tourists who still vacation there each year. Despite the fact that Abkhazia is no longer the place of choice for Russian decision-makers, leaders such as Putin and Medvedev, often vacation in Sochi, less than 100 miles from Abkhazia. Nevertheless, according to Nemtsova (2010), Russian special services continue to have an especially close relationship with the Abkhaz authorities. According to Tsyshba, the privatization guru of Gagra, after 1991 several former and current FSB officers have come to rent and privatize luxury hotels, sanatoriums, and dachas on prime locations, making the city “the best FSB resort.”

In the chaos of the post-Soviet collapse, to paraphrase Marx, all that was solid melted into air, all that was holy was profaned, and political elites were at last compelled to face with sober senses, their real conditions of life. With ideology and institutions gone, they tried to preserve what they had left of the old – their relationships and routines. While these relationships and routines alone did not decisively shape foreign policy (ideology of transition; of integration with the West and distancing itself from the post-Soviet space being equally if not more important), in the absence of a strategy to deal with an increasingly complex and challenging environment, in the long-term, they became a lodestar for Russian policy-makers in 1990s.

Interbellum 1999–2008

Further "enhancing the regional position of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia was the changing Russian policy with the presidency of Vladimir Putin. Unlike the ambivalence of the Yeltsin era, where Russians certainly supported the

⁹² Here it is possible to draw parallels with Crimea. Crimea is historically more important for Russia than just a tourist destination and was brought fully into the fold, having been annexed and officially incorporated into the Russian federation. Abkhazia lacking such historical importance, nevertheless has symbolic importance, and was also brought into the fold, however not entirely and fully, maintaining its de facto independence but being heavily reliant on Russia.

secessionist efforts of the territories, but also offered sometimes support to the Georgians as well, under Putin the Russian policy became more consistently pro-Abkhazian and pro-Ossetian. Not only did the CIS peacekeeping unit in Abkhazia (and, arguably, a fully equipped Russian base in northern Abkhazia) provide security to the Abkhazians, starting in 2002 the Russians granted Abkhazians and South Ossetians partial citizenship. This offer did not formally incorporate the regions into the Russian Federation but extended some social welfare benefits to the economically devastated populations" (George, 2009, 133). Although Moscow formally withdrew from CIS embargo of Abkhazia only in 2008, in practice trade sanctions were lifted much earlier. After its independence Georgia had to accept the stationing of four Russian bases on its territory with a total of around 9,200 troops. At the 1999 OSCE summit Russia agreed to withdraw troops from Vaziani (near Tbilisi) and Gudauta (in Abkhazia) until 2004, while the bases in Akhalkalaki (Javakheti) and Batumi (Adjara) were abandoned in 2007. (Coene 2009, 39).

August War 2008 and Russia's recognition

The war started on the morning of August 8, just after the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympiad on which the gaze of the international community was fixed. Russian troops poured through the Roki tunnel from North to South Ossetia, driving the Georgian army back almost to Tbilisi in five days (Marshall 2010, 306). While the August War focused on Ossetia, some fighting took place in Abkhazia as the Abkhazians expelled the Georgian troops from the Kodori valley (Coene 2009, 151), leaving the Abkhaz for the first time in full control of the territory they laid claim on (Kabachnik 2012, 403). Georgian military moved out of Kodori on 12 August, retreating with hundreds of Georgians who had been living there. On the same day, Russian soldiers based in Abkhazia entered Georgia proper and occupied Poti (Coene 2009, 155). Then, Russians military operations stopped, having achieved their objectives, and a ceasefire was signed. On 16th August, with the mediation of the French President Sarkozy (France was at the time chairing the European Council), a six-point peace plan was signed (Antonenko 2008, 27) by Russia and Georgia.

Although some scholars (Cornell 2009) have argued that Russia had a contingency plan to invade the two de facto states and attack Georgia, no senior US official holds this view, suggesting that "the Russian leadership was genuinely surprised by Georgia's attack." (Toal 2017, 164). It would be wrong to understand August War in only one dimension, either as 'Georgian genocide' or as 'premeditated Russian aggression'. The war was a result of Saakashvili's efforts to recover the 'lost territories', which provoked a reaction within these territories and their Russian patron (Toal 2017, 128). While Saakashvili's rhetoric and actions towards the de facto states were revanchist (Toal 2017, 144), Russia was not seeking revenge against Georgia in the August War, but recognition from the West. Despite alleging that the West was partially responsible for the war, they consistently remained very cautious to keep a working relationship with the EU, and "one could see that Russia was seeking recognition rather than revenge in this war" (Samokhvalov 2017, 194). The war and the ensuing recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia clearly had the function of checking NATO's expansion to the Caucasus (Toal 2017, 281) and deterring the West from impinging on Russia's strategic interests (Rumer et al. 2017). However, Russia's reaction was not a mere strategic and geopolitical response. According to Toal (2017, 167), "Saakashvili's armed intervention caused great anger and provoked disgust among Russian political elites, which was visible in the language they employed – "not the language of diplomacy or transactional geopolitics. Instead, this was the language of righteous anger." Putin felt betrayed, he felt that Saakashvili whom he had helped to get rid of Abashidze in Adjara, failed to honour his promises and abstain from using military force. Russia resented Georgian attempts to change the format of the conflict resolution negotiations and to include the EU and UN in the peacekeeping, which would effectively undermine Russia's role. They resented Saakashvili's creation of alternative governments and administrations in exile, his unwillingness to talk to de facto authorities and his reliance on military force (Samokhvalov 2017, 193–194). If the war came as a shock to Georgia, another one would follow soon. On 26th August 2008, Abkhazia received its first recognition, when President Medvedev signed a decree recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia "as independent and sovereign states", calling on other states to follow suit (Coene 2009, 155). The decree stated

that “Russia continually displayed calm and patience. We repeatedly called for returning to the negotiating table and did not deviate from this position of ours even after the unilateral proclamation of Kosovo’s independence. However, our persistent proposals to the Georgian side to conclude agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the non-use of force remained unanswered. Regrettably, they were ignored also by NATO and even at the United Nations.” (Jeifets & Dobronravin 2017, 221).

Russia has justified its recognition on remedial grounds with President Medvedev claiming that Georgia had chosen genocide when it attacked South Ossetia and that Russia’s recognition of the two de facto states was to provide the safety for their populations (Coppieters 2018, 1002). Rather than focusing on the right of peoples to self determination, Russia argued its recognition was legitimate on moral and practical grounds, because coexistence of Abkhaz and Ossetians within Georgia was untenable (Dubinsky 2018, 245–246). The Russian president claimed that Georgia's objective was "annexing South Ossetia through the annihilation of a whole people" and that "the same fate lay in store for Abkhazia" (Dubinsky 2018, 243–244). With the recognition, Russia showed disregard for the principle of territorial sovereignty, which it later repeated in Crimea in 2014. By acting in such a way, it contradicted its position on sovereignty in the cases of Iraq, Serbia, Syria, and others (Deyermond 2016, 957). However, inconsistencies were also present during Western recognition of Kosovo as countries granted their recognition regardless of Serbia’s claim to territorial integrity and despite the fact that Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council calling for the respect of Serbia's territorial integrity, was still valid. In other words, “Kosovo was recognised while at the same time there was a legally binding document in force demanding (implicitly) not to recognise" (Hille 2010, 196). Arguably as important as the recognitions but much less discussed, was the signing of treaties between Russia and the de facto states on September 17, 2008. In the 'Agreements on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support', the sides pledged to help defend each other’s sovereignty, to grant each other the right to build and make use of military bases, and to work towards close economic integration (Gerrits & Bader 2016, 302). These treaties, which represent the foundation for subsequent agreement, are identical in all but the names of the entities, which points to

Russia being able to impose its rules on the new actors with weak bargaining power (Ambrosio & Lange 2016, 679).

The August War was not without consequences for Russia. Its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the August War drastically diminished the leverage it held over Tbilisi (Makarychev 2016, 2), however the relations soon began restoring and in January 2010 air traffic was reopened. In the August War, Russia effectively checked Western involvement in the 'Near Abroad', but it also signalled that it possessed military capabilities and could use them to secure its interests like a great power, stopping the decline in its status and stabilizing its horizontal relationships. Its ontological security was further enhanced by recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia and establishing a new set of vertical relationships with them, giving it the ability to play a great power role at least vis-à-vis the actors in its Near Abroad.

Empirical scope and case selection

Drawing on my theoretical framework, I believe that focusing on meaning and interpretation of (non-)recognition and (non-)engagement by policy elites in de facto states as well as decision-makers in recognised actors would allow us to better understand the interaction between de facto states and other actors in the international community. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, changes in the meaning of non-recognition are changes that affect both sides of the relationship; the (non-)recognised and the (non-)recognizing. This calls for looking at both sides of the interaction; the de facto state and its interlocutors. Therefore, the object of my research is foreign policy interaction between a de facto state and recognised actors, its scope covering three sets of interactions: Abkhazia-EU, Abkhazia-Russia and Abkhazia-US. Below, I discuss the selection of my cases, the historical context in which they appear and the timeframe I employ.

Case selection: Abkhazia

There are many de facto states (depending on the criteria chosen, of course) in the world today,⁹³ which makes finding a good case for my research on the role of elite perceptions on foreign policy interactions between de facto states and recognised actors no less difficult than in a small set, but for different reasons. As Flick (2007, 27) notes, the selection of cases (sampling) "in qualitative research in most cases is not oriented on a formal (e.g. random) selection of a part of an existing or assumed population. Rather it is conceived as a way of setting up a collection of deliberately selected cases, materials or events for constructing a corpus of empirical examples for studying the phenomenon of interest in the most instructive way." In purposive sampling, such as mine, the bigger the choice, the bigger the possibility of making the wrong choice. Through the selection of case studies, the researcher does not only show familiarity with the population of cases, but also demonstrates his or her own reflexivity. Or as Stake (1994, 237) put it: "a case study is both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning". Therefore, I spent a lot of time considering different options before making my final choice. I outline the reasons and arguments as well as limitations below.

Although mine is a single case study, it is worth taking Klotz's (2008) advice that every single case study is in a hermeneutical sense - in relation to the context it was extracted from - comparative: "Researchers need to remember that cases are cases of something Well-crafted case selection takes into account the universe of possible cases and the logic of comparison implied by the research question."⁹⁴ Even more so because although it is a single case study, as mentioned before, I look at three sets of interactions and at two time periods (1999–2008 and 2008–2014), so opportunities and need for comparison abounds. However, I prefer to think of my research in terms of Gray's (2004, 132) classification of case studies. Per Gray's definition my case study can be

⁹³ While Caspersen (2012, 11-12) quotes seventeen cases and two borderline cases of unrecognised states after 1991, out of which nine still exist today, Florea (2017), using looser criteria, finds seventeen de facto states 'alive' today.

⁹⁴ Gerring (2004, 346) expresses a similar idea: "It seems justifiable for case studies to work on two levels simultaneously, the unit itself and some broader class of (perhaps difficult to specify) units."

considered as an embedded case study in which "there may be a number of different units of analysis." This means that the case and unit of analysis are not the same. My case - put more precisely - is not Abkhazia, but foreign relations of Abkhazia. Within that case there are different units of analysis (decision-makers in Abkhazia, EU, US, Russia). Baxter and Jack (2008, 550) discuss the merits of embedded case studies: "The ability to look at sub-units that are situated within a larger case is powerful when you consider that data can be analysed within the subunits separately (within case analysis), between the different subunits (between case analysis), or across all of the subunits (cross-case analysis). The ability to engage in such rich analysis only serves to better illuminate the case." Yin (2003) warns against the problem many novice researchers face - failure to return to the main problem after analysing the sub-units. In my case the danger is getting lost in interpretations and policy-planning at the level of policy-makers in Abkhazia, EU, Russia and US while missing the bigger picture. To avoid this, I frequently refer back to Chapter 1 and my main argument about the way interpretations of non-recognition influence the formulation and implementation of foreign policy objectives and strategies.

Another useful distinction - between idiographic and nomothetic single case studies - is offered by Gerring (2006). While the first ones are entirely interpretivist and only aim to explain a single case, nomothetic case studies - although still focusing on a single case - aim to implicitly and indirectly compare the case with the larger population and are therefore more concerned with generalisation. Mine is therefore an embedded nomothetic single case study that seeks to provide a holistic account of Abkhazia's foreign relations but at the same time reflect upon the foreign relations of other de facto states and the de facto state foreign policy as such. This means some of my findings are generalisable beyond the case of Abkhazia (discussed further in Chapter 7).

In my research, I focus on a specific territorial and temporal context. I look at Abkhazia as a case among other de facto states (in Chapter 7 I discuss that my findings are not limited only to post-Soviet cases). These cases are interesting for several reasons: emergence out of wars that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, common (especially administrative and political) Soviet legacy, the

process of economic and political transition, being perceived by scholars and practitioners for most of their existence as temporary exceptions to the nation-state system and as illegitimate actors (black holes) on the political map of Europe.

Four de facto states fit these criteria: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh. Although I draw occasional parallels between these, I examine the case of Abkhazia in more detail, looking at how its political elites and decision-makers in Brussels, Moscow and Washington - who interact with their Abkhazian counterparts - interpret non-recognition and how does this interpretation influence the formulation and implementation of their respective foreign policy objectives and strategies. Leaning on Flick (2007) and Patton's (2002) guidelines for selecting cases, I argue that Abkhazia is both a *critical case* in which we can examine foreign interactions between a de facto state and recognised actors with most clarity as well as an *extreme/deviant case*,⁹⁵ which needs to be accounted before any generalization about post-Soviet de facto states as such are to be made. Just like one must better understand its extreme/deviant elements - the de facto states - if one wants to understand the nation-state system, we need to look at deviant cases among the de facto states to better understand the de facto statehood as such.

⁹⁵ Klotz (2008, 51–53) discusses *easy* and *least likely* cases.

Abkhazia as a critical case

Flick (2007, 28) calls critical cases "those cases in which the experiences or processes to be studied become especially clear – for example in the opinion of experts in the field." These cases are in some way unfavourable - they are the most difficult ones to test a certain hypothesis on. However, if the hypothesis is successfully tested on these cases, we can reasonably expect that the same hypothesis would also be confirmed when tested on more conventional cases. Flyvbjerg (2006, 225-226) illustrates this with Galileo's choice of lead and a feather to test his theory of gravity: "if Galileo's thesis held for these materials, it could be expected to be valid for all or a large range of materials" (Flyvbjerg 2006, 226). It is important to note that metallic object and a feather do not function as extreme cases here, although the line between critical and extreme case can - such as in this example - be hard to define and the two categories can overlap. Flyvbjerg (2006, 229) provides further clarification: "The extreme case can be well-suited for getting a point across in an especially dramatic way, which often occurs for well-known case studies such as Freud's (2003) "Wolf-Man" and Foucault's (2012) 'Panopticon.' In contrast, a critical case can be defined as having strategic importance in relation to the general problem." The critical and the extreme case are therefore distinct *in relation to the general problem* but can overlap in terms of the case itself. Flyvbjerg (2006) believes the best way of identifying critical cases is to look for either "most likely" or "least likely" cases, but this would mean selecting a case on the dependent variable, which is generally not advised. Therefore, in my selection the most important criterion was how much there is to research, in other words, the extent and meaningfulness of external relations.

The development of the margin of internal and external independence greater than in other post-Soviet *de facto* states has happened against all odds (making it a critical case). First, as mentioned above, Abkhazia is a heterogenous, multi-ethnic society in which the titular nation that achieved secession and declared independence was a minority. Second, a Soviet vacation spot, Abkhazia lacked economic resources to sustain itself. Whereas Transnistria had a strong industrial base and Nagorno-Karabakh was helped by the large and wealthy Armenian

diaspora, Abkhazia was much less industrialised and had a much less influential diaspora. Furthermore, it didn't even have a patron and Russia (which would later become its patron) enforced a CIS economic embargo that crippled the economy. Its continued existence was possible more due to the weakness of Georgia than due to its own strengths. From the outset, Abkhazia could not rely on any one actor, which prevented it from proverbially 'putting all eggs in one basket'. Maintaining relations (often through diaspora ties) with local actors in Russia (especially the North Caucasian republics and in Krasnodarski Krai) and Turkey rather than having a state as a patron was instrumental in its survival and later worked as a guarantee against over-dependence.

Abkhazia is arguably the most viable of the four post-Soviet de facto states; having access to sea, a port and the possibility to trade with other countries in addition to possessing significant hydropower generation facilities (Inguri), some industry (cement), natural resources (wood), availability of fertile land (tangerines) and large tourist potential (mainly Russian tourists). Since Abkhazia is more viable and less constrained by material factors, this provides more manoeuvring space for political elites, allowing it to compensate the relative isolation of non-recognition. I expect the political elites to disagree on how these (more significant than in other de facto states) resources should be managed and to express concerns regarding economic over-dependence on Russia. A greater degree of state-building in comparison to other de facto states also increases Abkhazia's viability.

In relation to its viability, Abkhazia has, throughout its existence as a de facto state, retained a greater margin of independence than other post-Soviet de facto states. Whereas regime changes in other three de facto states are rare occurrences, Abkhazia has since declaring independence had four different heads of state (Ardzinba, Baghaps, Ankvab, and Khajimba). These regime changes must – to a certain extent – be translated into changes in foreign policy. During the presidencies of Baghaps and Ankvab, Abkhazia has shown the most ability and willingness to develop an independent, multi-vector foreign policy in which it prefers to engage with Turkey and EU in addition to its patron Russia, while Khajimba has since his ascent to power in 2014 signed several agreements

with Russia, forging even closer ties between the countries. I expect that regime changes and changes in foreign policy affect how elites interpret non-recognition at different points in time. It would be reasonable to expect that members of elite, who do not see over-reliance on Russia as a problem (or not to the same extent as the others) see non-recognition as less constraining, perhaps even rejecting the notion itself and seeing Abkhazia as being recognised (by Russia and a handful of other states).

Although few states and international organisations are interested in engaging with Abkhazia, there has been more interest in engaging Abkhazia than other post-Soviet de facto states as EU's policy of engagement without recognition testifies. This may be because of the geopolitical position of Abkhazia (EU), economic benefits and diaspora (Turkey) or because of conflict resolution attempts (EU, OSCE). After 2008, when Abkhazia forged closer ties with Russia, some interest of the West may have been lost, but Abkhazia has become more relevant again with the Ukraine crisis and its implications for the Black Sea region. Since Abkhazia seems to figure more prominently in the minds of decision-makers in Brussels, Washington and Moscow than the other three de facto states (with only Transnistria perhaps arousing a similar level of interest), it is more likely to come across more informed, elaborate and diverse opinions on engagement in general and on interpretation of non-recognition in particular.

Abkhazia as an extreme/deviant case

According to Patton (2002), the researcher should make a conscious effort to integrate extreme or deviant cases. In three important ways Abkhazia is such a case and any research that aspires to a level of generalisation must account for these. First, among all post-Soviet de facto states, it is the only case of a secession by a minority (Zürcher 2007, 54). Consequently, the ethnic war narrative - a popular explanatory framework applied to post-Soviet de facto states – does not completely apply.⁹⁶ Second, among all the post-Soviet de facto states

⁹⁶ Abkhazia was and is a multi-ethnic state in which allegiances are often quite complicated and it would be an oversimplification to present the conflict as Abkhazian-Georgian in ethnic terms, like for instance the Ossetian-Georgian conflict. Many Armenians joined Abkhazians in fighting Georgians (despite many Armenians living in Georgia and even forming the majority of

and despite being largely dependent on Russia, Abkhazia has shown much more agency and appetite for true independence than other de facto states. Consequently, the narrative that presents it as a Russian puppet state or satellite does not hold water. Third, Abkhazia is the only one among post-Soviet de facto states to have access to the sea and the access to shipping lanes with potential for passenger, import and export transport. Consequently, the discourse of de facto states as peripheral territories, prisoners of their own geography relegated to the role of buffers etc. does not correspond to Abkhazia's situation.

As a multi-ethnic society with regular and competitive elections, Abkhazia has the most diverse political elite among the four de facto states (Nagorno-Karabakh and Ossetia are mono-ethnic, while oppositional elites are small and weak in Transnistria and South Ossetia). The political elite, although dominated by ethnic Abkhazians and members of Raul Khajimba's pro-Russian political party Forum for the National Unity of Abkhazia, differ according to ethnicity (and sometimes local identity), government/opposition role and party membership and attitude towards closer ties with Russia. I expect different political elites to ascribe different meanings to non-recognition, with ethnicity being the most important factor in shaping elite perceptions of non-recognition.

Abkhazia's status in Soviet administrative hierarchy was the highest among all future de facto states: Abkhazia was a Socialist Soviet Republic (SSR Abkhazia) with the status of a treaty republic in association with the Georgian SSR, after 1931 incorporated into Georgia as the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Abkhaz ASSR). South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh were mere Autonomous Oblast (AO), lower in status than both the SSR and the ASSR. It is this 10-year period of being equal to other Socialist Soviet Republics like Russian SSR and Ukrainian SSR, that is at the heart of both Soviet-era grievances as well as the post-Soviet demands for secession and independence.

The primary reasons for choosing Abkhazia as my case study have to do with it standing out in the group of post-Soviet de facto states. It is a critical case in

Samtskhe–Javakheti region). Some Gali Georgians joined Georgian lines, while others refused to take sides.

which we can observe foreign policy interaction (and how much of it there actually is) as well as being an extreme/deviant case, which needs explaining in order to better understand post-Soviet de facto states as a group. However, the fact that Abkhazia stands out in mentioned ways should not obscure the similarities between it and the other three post-Soviet de facto states. Although in no way a typical case,⁹⁷ Abkhazia shares some traits with other post-Soviet de facto states, enabling a certain level of generalizability of conclusions.

Although not in itself a reason for selecting Abkhazia, the existence and availability of good research in languages the researcher understands, is an important practical consideration. On the other hand, having a wealth of data and literature can render research unnecessary or irrelevant. Abkhazia is more researched than Transnistria and especially South Ossetia due to better accessibility, but less researched than Nagorno-Karabakh (due to the more precarious security situation the international interest is greater). Although foreign policy of Abkhazia and engagement with other actors in the international system is still poorly researched (with only Frear's 2014 paper dedicated specifically to this question), there is a sizable body of literature on Abkhaz history, ethnicity (a lot of anthropological and linguistic research), identity and the relations between these. There is a sizable body of useful literature in Russian (Kuznetsova 2013; Petrova 2011; Shkunov 2010; and some literature in French (Zarifian 2010; Barriere 2010; Dembinska 2009) and Spanish (Pevarello 2014; Janashvilli 2014; Ramirez 2013; Casallas 2013) – to consider only publications in languages I can read, which has not been considered by the majority of English-speaking scholars. This literature, although it is not specifically dedicated to discussing the meaning and perception of non-recognition and how it affects interaction, can be very helpful on providing context for understanding perceptions of elites and decision makers.

⁹⁷ A typical case is one that is closest to the average case among the population of cases.

Case selection: choosing the interactors

As stated in the introduction, I look at both sides of the interaction; the de facto state and the recognised actors in the international community with which it interacts. Even though foreign policy interactions of de facto states are limited by internal and external constraints, namely their smallness (meaning they dispose of limited resources and capacities to conduct foreign policy) and lack of recognition (which narrows both the scope as well as intensity of interactions they can have), it is still too wide of a research field to cover within this thesis. Therefore, it makes sense to look at the actors Abkhazia has meaningful interaction with. The population of potential cases includes the following.

First, recognised (UN member) states, which have recognised Abkhazia: Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and Syria. Russia is the obvious choice here. On 9 September 2008, it became the first country to recognise and establish diplomatic relations with Abkhazia. Throughout time these relations have expanded and deepened, culminating in the signing of controversial defence and economic cooperation treaties with Russia in November 2014. Russian-Abkhaz relations are comprehensive and include political, economic, military and cultural relations. Even though Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru have recognised and established diplomatic relations with Abkhazia, they do not share a border with the de facto republic and are indeed very far away, limiting prospects for interaction. None of them have established any sort of permanent diplomatic presence in Abkhazia. Despite the initial enthusiasm on the Abkhaz side and talk of potential for cooperation, the current level of interaction with Nicaragua and Venezuela is very low, while Vanuatu and Tuvalu have withdrawn their recognition.

Second, unrecognised and partially recognised (non-UN member) states, which have recognised Abkhazia: Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria. Since none of the other post-Soviet de facto states share a border with Abkhazia, the interaction has been limited. Moreover, the possibilities for interaction have been further limited by non-recognition and limited resources.

Third, recognised (UN member) states, which have not recognised Abkhazia but have had some degree of continuous (even if indirect) interaction with Abkhazian de facto authorities in the past: Georgia, the US, Turkey. Georgia, the parent state of Abkhazia, continues its policy of counter-recognition and has since the August War in 2008 claimed that Abkhazia is an occupied territory. Georgian authorities and Abkhaz de facto authorities continuously interact, but that interaction is limited to Geneva Peace Process. Since I'm not looking at the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the conflict resolution process, Georgian-Abkhaz relations are not of my primary interest. The US has not recognised Abkhazia and follows Georgia in claiming that Abkhazia is an occupied territory. It is however a party in the Geneva International Discussions, has an interest in conflict resolution in the region, while its representatives continue to interact informally and in unofficial capacity with Abkhaz de facto representatives. Despite there being no official interaction in terms of track one diplomacy, there is meaningful and continuous interaction through intermediaries, such as USAID (a US governmental agency dealing with foreign aid), HALO Trust (a British-American non-profit organisation) and through academic and youth exchanges. Turkey, home to the biggest diaspora of ethnic Abkhaz is another country to consider. Turkey, which maintains good relations with Georgia, does not recognise Abkhazia, but is the de facto state's "second-largest trading partner (after Russia), with 18 percent of Abkhazia's total trade turnover" (Rukhadze 2015). However, much of that trade happens through the Abkhaz diaspora networks on both sides without direct participation of the Turkish state. Turkey has in the past interacted directly with de facto authorities in Abkhazia. In 2009, Abkhaz officials in Sukhum/i received a visit by the Foreign Ministry Deputy Undersecretary Ünal Çeviköz (*ibid.*). In April 2011, Abkhazia's President Baghapsh visited Ankara and met with Turkish officials (Frear 2014, 10). On one hand, the history of interaction makes Turkey an appealing potential case. On the other hand, these interactions have mostly been limited to economic and cultural relations and in most cases, took place through the networks of Abkhaz diaspora. There is no permanent Turkish representation in Abkhazia. Furthermore, the Abkhaz-Turkish relations have been damaged during the Turkish-Russian crisis following Turkish shoot-down of a Russian military aircraft, when Abkhazia followed Russia in declaring

economic sanctions against Turkey, even if it had little impact on trade relations. In words of Frear (2014, 11): "Despite official Abkhazian rhetoric it is unlikely the Abkhazian-Turkish relationship will develop further until direct (and un-harassed) transportation links by land, sea and air can be established. In the meantime, the Turkish vector will remain heavily dependent on transnational factors, primarily the activities of the diaspora and religious institutions." It is for all these reasons, that I am choosing to look at the interaction between US and Abkhazia rather than that between Turkey and Abkhazia.

Fourth, International (intergovernmental) organisations that have not recognised Abkhazia but have had some degree of continuous (even if indirect) interaction with Abkhazian de facto authorities in the past: UN, OSCE, and the European Union. UN, OSCE, and the EU are the three co-chairs of the Geneva International Discussions, the conflict resolution format, which includes representatives of Georgia, Russia, the US, and participants from Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁹⁸ The United Nations is an exclusive club of recognised member states. The official position of the UN is one of upholding Georgia's territorial integrity, reflecting a quasi-consensus in the international community. UN's role as a mediator and co-chair in the Geneva Process both requires and enables a certain degree of interaction with the de facto authorities, but these do not go beyond UN's mediator mission, which is demonstrated "in the consistent failure of Abkhazian officials to gain a platform at the UN from which to express their opinion, a position that has caused deep resentment among the Abkhazian authorities who identify this as biggest obstacle as obtaining a US visa" (Frear 2014, 8). The UNDP - a UN agency concerned with development - does maintain an office in Sukhum/i, there are UN-funded programmes (mostly funded by UNCHR and UNICEF) implemented by UNDP, UNICEF and a plethora of non-governmental organisations, but there is little interaction between UN and Abkhazia above UN agency level and outside of mostly NGO-implemented projects. The closure of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) on 16 June 2009 due to a Russian veto, has further diminished this interaction. Despite being one of

⁹⁸ Abkhazians and South Ossetians are not equal parties to the other three in the GID and do not have official representatives. They merely have 'participants' who take part in the GID in their personal capacity.

the three co-chairs of the Geneva International Discussions, OSCE keeps a relatively low profile when it comes to interaction with Abkhaz de facto authorities. The OSCE Mission to Georgia, which was tasked with assisting the Georgian Government with conflict settlement, democratization, human rights and the rule of law issues operated out of Tbilisi between November 1992 and 31 December 2008, when its mandate expired (OSCE 2008) following the August War in 2008. Ever since the closure, OSCE's presence on the ground has been limited to regular staff visits to Georgia. For instance, on 16th April 2015, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Astrid Thors visited the administrative boundary line near Abkhazia and met people displaced from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. She expressed an intention of visiting Sukhum/i in the future (OSCE 2015). "Many former OSCE Mission Members moved to the newly established EU Mission (European Union Monitoring Mission, EUMM), which patrols on the Georgian side of the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) and took over the monitoring of the conflict regions. In July 2010, some 26 former OSCE staff members were employed at EUMM headquarters in Tbilisi alone. Their great experience and, above all, their knowledge of how the conflict appears from the South Ossetian side of the conflict zone are of enormous value to the new mission" (Stöber 2010, 219). In addition to that, the only other form of OSCE interaction with Abkhazia is the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), which "was created in February 2009 as a result of the Geneva Discussions that followed the 2008 conflict in Georgia. The meetings are an opportunity to discuss, among other issues: the identification of potential risks, the follow-up of incidents and the exchange of information, as well as problems affecting the communities on a daily basis. The meetings are co-facilitated by the OSCE and the EUMM" (OSCE 2018). IPRM however is focused not on interactions with (de facto) authorities on both sides, but on interaction with communities and residents in the areas in and around Gal/i (in Abkhazia) and Ergneti (just outside South Ossetia). The European Union is neither a state nor an international organisation, which means that its interactions with Abkhazia are complex. They involve several institutions, such as EEAS, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and mostly adhere to the EU's so called 'engagement without recognition' policy. This policy uses engagement as a carrot

to incentivise Abkhazia to participate in the conflict resolution process under the format of the Geneva International Discussions, of which the EU is a co-chair. Alongside Russia and the US, the EU is the most important political actor in the South Caucasus and its Eastern Partnership initiative is an important element of regional integration that allows EU to promote its values as a regional normative hegemon (Frear 2014, 9), although the EU does not recognise Abkhazia and supports Georgia's territorial integrity. Due to internal differences among EU member states, forging of a common policy towards Abkhazia (and other post-Soviet de facto states) has been difficult, which has been reflected in different stances EU institutions have taken in the past. For instance, the EEAS usually does not apply the term 'occupied territory' to Abkhazia, while the European Parliament was among the first to have adopted it. EU's role in conflict resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was minor compared to UN and OSCE, but has grown significantly after 2008, when UNOMIG and OSCE Mission to Georgia closed, leaving the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM) as the primary peacekeeping force, albeit one not permitted to enter Abkhazia (Frear 2014, 9). EU's presence also includes the European Union Special Representatives (EUSR) for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, who travels to Abkhazia and interacts with the de facto authorities. EU-Abkhaz foreign policy interactions are similarly under the radar to the ones between the US and Abkhazia with EU preferring to be involved through projects implemented by international and local NGOs.

Fifth, other actors in the international community: ICRC, UNPO, other NGOs (Soros Foundation, World Vision, Danish Refugee Council, Accion Contra el Hambre, Conciliation Resources, Berghoff Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, among others). Abkhazia's interaction with these other actors - mostly non-governmental organisations - is important in terms of mediation, support to conflict-resolution process, providing humanitarian and developmental assistance, and other services. However, none of these actors maintains comprehensive and continuous relations with the Abkhaz de facto authorities.

As follows from the above presentation of potential case studies, the object of my research are the foreign policy interactions between a de facto state and recognised actors: Abkhazia-Russia, Abkhazia-US and Abkhazia-EU relations.

Time-frame

Having outlined the most important periods and events that form the historical context of this research, I now narrow my chronological window. Every research project inevitably needs to be limited by choosing the research question and hence the topic of focus, the case(s), as well as choosing the appropriate time-frame. Generally, there are two kind of research time-frames: cross-sectional and longitudinal. The first one is a “a ‘snapshot’ approach where the data are collected at one point in time”, while the second is used “to study change and development over time” (Gray 2004, 31–32). The latter is more relevant to my research project, as I’m interested how non-recognition affects elite perception, decision-making and state behaviour, including the foreign policy of de facto state Abkhazia. As perceptions, behaviours, decision-making processes and policies change gradually and over a longer period of time (usually several years or even decades), longitudinal time-frame is more relevant. This is particularly the case since I’m asking the ‘how’ question, i.e. I am interested not only in what was the state of affairs in two moments in the past, but how we got from one to the other. Having selected the longitudinal time-frame, I now proceed to define the start and cut-off dates and years of my research focus: 12th October 1999 when the Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia was signed and entered into force and 24th November 2014 when the Russian-Abkhaz ‘Agreement on Alliance and Strategic Partnership’ was signed. Despite the fact that the Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia marked the second time Abkhazia has declared independence, this can be considered the only formal declaration of independence. The conclusion of ‘Agreement on Alliance and Strategic Partnership’ of November 24th, 2014 marked a long process of Abkhazia’s increasing dependence on and integration with Russia. I hypothesize that the period roughly between 12th October 1999 and after November 24th, 2014 is the period of real Abkhazian de facto statehood. Before 1999, Abkhazia was cut-off from the rest of the world by a crippling embargo, with a war-torn economy,

fledgling institutions and hence more of a secessionist breakaway province than a de facto state. After 2014, Abkhazia is more integrated with Russia with a significantly smaller margin of independence than before, hence becoming closer to a Russian protectorate. The period of fifteen years between these two watershed moments is long enough to observe changes in perceptions, behaviours, decision-making processes and policies, while being short enough to allow the research to be focused and manageable, i.e. not to get lost in a mass of data that is not strictly relevant to the case. Moreover, it includes the optimal spectrum of different political contexts needed to understand the changes in foreign policy interaction as it covers the Ardzinba, Bagapsh, Ankvab and Khajimba presidencies in Abkhazia, the Yeltsin and Putin/Medvedev presidencies in Russia, and Shevarnadze, Saakashvili and Margvelashvili presidencies in Georgia. Furthermore, it includes the periods when Abkhazia was under embargo and nearly completely isolated, the period when it was unrecognised but able to trade, and finally the period after 2008 when it became partially recognised. It includes the hugely important August 2008 war as well as reset and again the worsening of relations between Russia and the West, the takeover of Crimea and part of the ongoing War in Ukraine – not the focus of our research but constituting the context that has to be considered.

Expectations

As discussed in Chapter 1, I expect the policy elites to be conscious of the geopolitical context and internal developments in the de facto state, to make connections between the two, to have a strong interest in preserving the state identity, to consider ontological security important and see foreign policy as one of the ways of preserving it. I also expect policy elites to understand the geopolitical interests of other actors to play their geopolitical roles in a way to preserve (or increase) their de facto independence.

Building on top of these expectations, with the historical context presented in this chapter in mind, I expect Abkhaz officials to express their interest in engagement with other countries, but do not expect them to make direct references to the multi-vector foreign policy of the previous presidents, Baghaps and Ankvab.

Instead, I expect them to see Russia as the most important and reliable partner but still with a degree of mistrust based on historical experiences. It is reasonable to assume that the opinions of political elites differ according to their ethnicity; Abkhazians, Armenians and, of course, Russians are expected to be more pro-Russian and Georgians in the Gal/i district to be more interested in a multi-vector foreign policy. The study conducted by O'Loughlin, Kolossov and Toal in 2011 *Inside Abkhazia: Survey of Attitudes in a De Facto State* points towards these expectations. I expect to find political elites (especially Abkhaz) in Abkhazia less committed to dialogue with Georgia than in the past and due to the worsening of the relations between Russia and the West, more sceptical of the latter, especially towards the EU. Most of them likely see non-recognition as a constraining factor. There is a possibility that non-Abkhaz interviewees could see non-recognition as benefiting the Abkhaz. I expect the Abkhaz government to be interested in keeping the status-quo and in very tight relations with Russia, while I expect the opposition to be more critical and weary of over-dependence of Russia and in favour of diversifying economic cooperation by deepening economic relations with EU, Turkey and other countries.

On the other side of the interaction, I have selected decision-makers from EU, United States and Russian Federation to be interviewed. EU and US are in the case of Abkhazia the most important gate-keepers, while EU also has strategic interest in Abkhazia because of its proximity and Abkhazia's geopolitical position. Both EU and US have an interest in resolving the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and in peace in the Caucasus and both have been engaged in. Russia is Abkhazia's ally and the state Abkhazia most significantly engages with.

While it may come as a surprise that only one interview with Georgian decision-makers (Paata Zakareishvili⁹⁹) was conducted, this can be explained by the fact that there is very little meaningful interaction between Georgia and Abkhazia beyond the format of the Geneva Process (the peace process intended to bring Georgian-Abkhaz conflict to an end through finding a peaceful solution) and that these as well as political discourse, foreign policy positions, strategies and

⁹⁹ Paata Zakareishvili was the Georgian Minister for Reintegration at the time when this interview was conducted.

arguments have been relatively well researched and literature on this readily available.

Conclusion

The chapter examined the historical context of the thesis that serves as a reference for the reader as well as for the researcher and that is referred back to in the empirical chapters. As this is an in-depth single-case study, understanding the history is crucial. Being aware of historical details is also important due to this being a contentious and highly politicised subject among Georgians and Abkhazians. Finally, as my research puts emphasis on identity and culture and such notions as honour and *apswara* (explored further in Chapter 4), it is unavoidable to know the context of their emergence and their relevance in different historical periods.

As the analysis shows, the history of Abkhazia is full of twists and turns: it was Georgia, which opened the gates to Russian influence in the South Caucasus (Zürcher 2007, 16), Abkhazian Bolsheviks who sided with Russian Bolsheviks against the Georgian Mensheviks (Souleimanov 2013, 114), Russia which in 1990s enforced an embargo on Abkhazia, Russia which recognised Abkhazia after the 2008 war with Georgia. Given this tumultuous history, two mistakes have to be avoided in further research. First, it is tempting to see these historical twists and turns as "a never-ending epic struggle between mountain dwellers and Cossacks, Christians, and Russians, taking place in the borderlands of empires, and being fuelled by a mountainous topography, as well as by deeply rooted cultural beliefs." (Zürcher 2007, 1) This would at best underplay the long periods of relatively stable and peaceful relations of coexistence between these peoples and at worst manifest itself in racist remarks about the backward and ever-warring tribes. The second temptation is just the opposite: to see history or even periods as monolithic and to simplify their complexity. As the analysis of the Soviet period showed, Abkhazian identity was both persecuted and entrenched, threatened and preserved.

In the second part of the chapter, the empirical scope of the research was introduced and justified. I chose Abkhazia as a critical and extreme/deviant case among the population of de facto states. While a critical case allows for exploring if and why it stands out among de facto states in terms of foreign policy interaction, choosing it as an extreme/deviant case, helps to better understand post-Soviet de facto states as a group (what they share and how Abkhazia differs from them). Although in no way a typical case, Abkhazia shares some traits with other de facto states, enabling a certain level of generalizability of conclusions (discussed further in Chapter 3 and Chapter 7). As my research examines both sides of the interaction, I have considered the population of actors that engage with Abkhazia, choosing Russia, the EU and the US as the most significant and meaningful. Next, I have defined my timeline cut-off dates to be 12th October 1999 when the Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia was signed and entered into force and 24th November 2014 when the Russian-Abkhaz 'Agreement on Alliance and Strategic Partnership' that was signed. Finally, I briefly discussed my research expectations which already anticipate some fieldwork and methodological choices (Chapter 3) and possible findings (Chapter 7).

Chapter 3: Methodology

“Доверяй, но проверяй” (“Trust, but verify”).
– Russian proverb

Introduction

In this chapter I look at how I go about answering my research question, set forth in Chapter 1. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss my research design and research strategy and provide arguments for its relevance and appropriateness. I then go on to adapt my approach and operationalize my theoretical concepts to best look at how Abkhazia’s political elites and decision-makers in Russia, the EU, and the US, interpret non-recognition and how this influences their foreign policy interaction. In this part I also decide how I go about engaging with empirical data. In the second part of the chapter, I shed more light on data collection, focusing on my two primary methods: interviews and process tracing. This is where I draw on my field work notes and observations, discuss the selection of interviewees and obstacles encountered. In the third part, I shift my focus to data analysis, describing in detail the process behind transcription, translation, analysis, and interpretation of data. Finally, I address the questions of validity and limitations to my research. I discuss the reliability of my methods, the objectivity of my research design. I go on to critically assess the explanatory weight of my research and to what extent its results can be generalized. I reflexively discuss the limits and biases of my research and the ethical considerations that have come up during it.

Methodology

Methodology represents the crucial link between my theoretical approach and the empirical reality that is the object of my research. It is therefore important to discuss where I came from and where I am going. As advised by Kallet (2004, 1229), usually there are several methods to choose from in investigating a

research problem and “the methodology section /.../ should clearly articulate the reasons why you chose a particular procedure or technique.” Klotz & Lynch (2007, 107), observe that the choice of method must draw on select evidence and the limits of different interpretations. In other words, the choices made regarding the methodology of research, define not only what I research, but also what must be left out: which data is not gathered and analysed. This is perhaps, after forming the research question, the second most important watershed moment in a PhD project as missing a crucial part of the puzzle, can be very difficult to correct later. However, despite the importance of getting methodology right, the researcher does not have the luxury of rigidly sticking to a pre-determined methodological design. It is often said that writing of a doctoral thesis is an iterative process. There are feedback loops between literature and theoretical concepts, between the researcher and the supervisor(s), but there is also “a give-and-take process between data collection and refinement of the research design” (Klotz & Lynch 2007, 107), so the researcher should remain open to new and surprising evidence that can challenge the central arguments or hypotheses of the research. The key to successful research can thus be summed up as: have a plan but be ready to change it, if necessary.

In the First Chapter, I developed a theoretical framework that aims to reconcile Realist and Constructivist elements and lends itself well to qualitative empirical research. According to Flick (2007, 21), “the theoretical perspective of our research program informs how we plan our concrete research.” My aim is to observe the interaction between interpretations of non-recognition and foreign policy behaviour through my tripartite conceptual framework of state identity, ontological security, and geopolitical role. My plan is to answer my research questions through analysing the data collected through elite interviewing and process tracing. Before choosing to work within a research paradigm, it is important to know its strengths, weaknesses, limitations, and above all the fit between the paradigm and the object of research. According to Harrison et al. (2017, 8), “qualitative paradigms are broad and can encompass exploratory, explanatory, interpretive, or descriptive aims.” Their strength is that they can give “complex textual descriptions” of peoples’ experience of a certain research issue. Therefore, they provide data about the “human” side of the research problem;

“the often-contradictory behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals.” Without getting into more detailed quantitative/qualitative discussions, this paradigm is well suited to my research that focuses on human behaviours and is interested in meaning and interpretation. Furthermore, “qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent” (Mack et al. 2005, 1–2). Since I examine state identity, ontological security and geopolitical role – all empirically grounded but to a large extent intangible factors, it makes sense to establish the foundation for my research firmly on qualitative ground.

Those familiar with the recent developments in the de facto states studies, understand that my qualitative, single-case, constructivist methodology goes against the current of in the field, which is progressively moving from case studies to large(r)-n comparative research (Florea 2017, Comai 2018) with the aim of reaching more generalizable conclusions and constructing a theory of de facto states: “Case-based research aims to develop “the conceptual underpinnings of future social scientific inquiry” as concepts derived from case-based research rather than causal inferences coming from variable-oriented research have been the most enduring contributions of modern social science (Schrank 2006, 23). Although this is often the trajectory taken by (sub-)disciplines, I believe a simple linear progression of the research agenda in the case of de facto states is deeply problematic. As I have mentioned before, the cases are very diverse, often highly culturally specific, and by abstracting away the context (as large-n research inevitably does), much detail is lost and results, now more generalized, not as valid. “Large-n fundamentalists” believe that small-n researchers should adopt or mimic their method by analysing larger numbers of cases. They advise small-n researchers to “maximize leverage by increasing the number of cases at their disposal” (Schrank 2006, 22). Indeed, there is a tendency to forcibly include more and more cases, including not only borderline cases, but also cases that cannot in any way be considered de facto states even according to the definitions used

by authors themselves.¹⁰⁰ Large-n research focuses on variables through exclusion of agents and mechanisms (Hedström & Swedberg 1998) and “while large-n researchers treat classificatory ambiguity as a threat, small-n researchers view it as an opportunity. “What is my case a case of?” they ask” (Schrank 2006, 33). This is the approach I follow in my own research.

Research design

According to Ragin (1994, 191), research design is “a plan for collecting and analysing evidence that makes it possible for the investigator to answer whatever questions he or she has posed.” Research design is concerned with practically all aspects of qualitative research ranging from specific details of data collection to the selection of data analysis techniques (Ragin 1994, 191). It is therefore the master plan that specifies how the data are collected and analysed. Flick (2007, 44) believes that the main element of good research design is the potential to limit the focus of the study. Good research design can break down complex research issues so that they are manageable with limited time and resources and can lead to results. In other words, the role of research design is preventing us to bite off more than we can chew. Even though good research is based on rules and procedures that ensure quality, validity and the possibility of verification, it also needs to incorporate a degree of flexibility. As Flick (2007, 79) stresses, flexible design is all about adapting the selection of interviewees and perhaps some of the questions to the development of the research process and to what researcher finds interesting and accessible in the field. That is why the methodology - even if limited to this chapter – in fact runs through the full length of the research project and the thesis: “Continuous design means to redesign – to adapt and improve the design – throughout the research process” (Flick, 2007, 79).

Having already drawn on my literature review in my Theoretical Framework without discussing the methodology of it, I feel the need to briefly address it now – in relation to the question of narrowing down the focus and limiting the scope

¹⁰⁰ For instance, Florea (2017, 339) considers Republika Srpska in Bosnia Herzegovina as a de facto state that continues to be ‘alive’ - and perhaps even more curiously - Gaza as a de facto state since 2007 with Palestine as its parent state.

of my research. This important early stage of research is often not explicitly discussed. Indeed, it is often dependent on an individual's 'googling skills' (Comai 2018) and as such more a question of search engine algorithms, arbitrariness and serendipity than methodical and systematic combing of the field. This is made more difficult since "literature review searches are nonlinear. There is no specific path for finding sources related to your topic" (Roselle & Spray 2012, 24). In case of interdisciplinary research, such as my own, the process is made even more difficult as relevant literature is spread out across different fields and searchable under different labels: "for example, ethnic conflict could just as easily fall within the publishing guidelines of a journal covering international law as it could be found in a journal on international organizations" (Roselle & Spray 2012, 24). My approach to literature review was to focus on my research question. In the first phase I read widely to be able to identify gaps in de facto state literature. I knew I wanted to focus on de facto states in post-Soviet space, but I was not sure about what I want to focus on, which cases and how many I want to choose, and what angle (theoretical framework and methodology) should be taken. Hence, I read to develop my research question and narrow down my focus. With the research question in place, I focused on depth: I read literature that helped me discover how to best go about answering my question, how to conceptualise its parts and how to grasp the empirical reality I was interested in. As Roselle & Spray (2012, 16) advise to remember always the purpose of the literature review, which is to ground the study "in the field of international relations" and to use it to get up to date with the understanding of other researchers in the field (Roselle & Spray 2012, 16). In other words, first I studied the literature to get up to speed with the scholars in the field, then to develop my own contribution. One of the trickier parts of interdisciplinary research methodology in general and literature review, is the complex connections and the overlap between various fields. When researching foreign policy, this overlap – in the form of intersection of domestic and international – is particularly acute as "foreign policy occurs in the complex intersection of domestic and international environments" (Neack 2014, 4).

Adapting my approach

In relation to researching intersecting areas, doing research on foreign policy also requires looking at different levels of analysis, since posing “questions at a single level, we acknowledge that our understanding will be limited to that level; an analysis conducted at just one level will not yield a complete picture” (Neack 2014, 9). This is complicated by the fact that these are not physically separate areas, but “heuristic devices—that help us study our subject.” To clarify with an analogy, levels of analysis are like different lenses on a camera and give us different views of the research subject. “At each level of analysis, we gain a particular perspective on or understanding of our subject” (Neack 2014, 9). In my case, these different levels of analysis are the subnational level (domestic politics), national level (foreign policy) and international level (interaction and engagement). It must be noted that state behaviours do not always fit comfortably in the three levels of analysis. This is particularly true of small de facto states, where domestic politics and foreign policy are closely intertwined. Foreign policy itself bridges the national-international divide and engagement with de facto states often has more to do with the domestic environment as the EU and the US prefer to engage directly with the civil society and NGOs and not with de facto governmental structures. Even when researching phenomena on the same level, a researcher may discover more sub-levels as it is sometimes necessary to contact people on several levels of administrative hierarchy before being able to get in touch with research participants. People on each level may have reservations against the researcher, the research or the institution (Flick, 2007, 58). If multi-level analysis depends on analysing (i.e. breaking the research subject down into smaller, more manageable units), it sometimes requires synthesizing assumptions, for instance the decisions of policy-makers can be seen as the decisions of the state. This conflation of elites with the state assumes that “all leaders will act in ways consistent with the long-term, persistent national interests of the country.” (Neack 2014, 17). However, if one is not careful to clearly demonstrate the presence of such “persistent national interests”, such assumptions can be put under question and the so called ‘level of analysis problem’ (discussed in Chapter 1) can arise.

A research design is a way of systematically organizing the research process, including adopting definitions and defining “clear measures for observations” (Roselle & Spray 2012, 32), but also importantly assesses the availability of resources and makes sure they are sufficient on relation to proposed research project (Flick, 2007, 51). In other words, a research design plays a vital role in adapting any general methodology (such as my qualitative, single-case, constructivist research) to the empirical reality under question (the role of perceptions of non-recognition on foreign policy interaction between Abkhazia and Russia, EU and US between 1999 and 2014).

Operationalization of concepts

According to Roselle & Spray (2012, 38), “operationalization is the process used in the social sciences to define variables in terms of observable properties. Without the clear definition of terms, readers and researchers may not have a common understanding of what is being studied.” This definition is, however, deceptively simple. It involves making a series of important decisions about which concepts to use and how they capture the empirical reality, and then defending those choices. Sometimes this may seem straightforward, but often a researcher would likely find different definitions of the same object or concept and “would use discretion in deciding which definition to adopt.” (Roselle & Spray 2012, 39).

Operationalisation is a two-step process. The first step consists of achieving conceptual clarity and the second is making sure it is a good fit for the empirical reality studied (Ruane 2005, 51). In case of mismatch, we need to either change the concept (definition), the way we use it (application) or the empirical reality we apply it to (case). Indeed, if we find ourselves struggling with operationalization, we need to sometimes reconsider revisiting our theoretical framework. Often, difficulties arising in measurement come from not having achieved sufficient conceptual clarity, for instance if we have not specified all the dimensions of our concepts (Ruane 2005, 52).

Operationalization can also be a transformation of “concepts into variables (the abstract into the concrete” (Ruane 2005, 57). In practice, operationalisation is achieved through adoption of operational definitions, which specify the steps of

the measurement process (Ruane 2005, 57). In my research I employ three key concepts that I now operationalize: state identity, geopolitical role, and ontological security.

State identity and geopolitical role

As discussed in Chapter 1, despite the changes in the perception of de facto states, their social identity (how other actors see them) is very much a negative identity – they are defined by others by what they are not, i.e. widely internationally recognised. It is better to define concepts by what they are than what they are not. If a state is composed of population and territory, then *state identity* consists of *national identity* and *geopolitical identity* (which I call ‘geopolitical role’ and look at separately). In Chapter 4: Foreign Relations of Abkhazia, I further unpack the notion of national identity, using Morin & Paquin's definition of national identity as “a socially constructed image that a political community uses to portray itself. It is made up of a set of elements, including constitutive norms, comparative categories, collective aspirations and cognitive references” (Morin & Paquin 2018, 261). I discuss important cultural (and therefore slowly-changing) sources of Abkhazian national identity, such as 1) apswara; 2) comparative categories and relations with outside actors that importantly shape national identity; 3) the influence of collective aspirations and anxieties, such as stigma, shame and isolation on national identity; cognitive references or how self-identity is reproduced in media and cartography, through mimicking and modelling.

As this goes well beyond operationalization, I want to focus here instead on a crucial methodological problem: how does one operationalize something as dynamic and reflexive as state identity? Identities are not unchangeable individual or collective characteristics; they are not assigned at birth but produced and reproduced by people. That is why constructivists examine the interlinked processes between actions and their contexts in the development of self-identity, the meanings behind it and the effects it produces (Klotz & Lynch 2007, 65). National identity with its slow-changing cultural norms may be considered the anchor of state identity, but there are important elements of state identity that are processual, and we cannot talk merely about being and not-being, but also about

becoming. This is best seen in the concept of state-building and – to a lesser extent – democratisation. These are, at least in the case of Abkhazia, empirically existing processes, but also important parts of state identity that authorities want to showcase. The state identity of Abkhazia is the self-identity, which includes state-building and democratisation as processual dimensions in opposition to the social identity of a largely unrecognised state.

To summarize into an operational definition: The state identity of Abkhazia is composed of national identity and geopolitical role. National identity is self-identity and as such positively based on slowly changing cultural norms, external relations, cognitive references and aspirations to statehood and recognition. These aspirations are empirically observable as promotion of cultural values, willingness to engage with other actors (preferably through the establishment of diplomatic relations, but also through trade, unofficial civil society engagement, and cultural links), and through state-building and democratisation. The state identity can best be captured through interviews with decision-makers and gleaned from official documents, such as statements of the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The state identity as a self-identity clashes with the social identity of Abkhazia, its identity as perceived by other actors in the international community. The social identity of Abkhazia is negative, based on the status of a widely unrecognised state (if not a puppet or an occupied territory). The social identity of Abkhazia is empirically observable through statements of states and international organisations voicing support for Georgia's territorial integrity, rejecting the recognition of Abkhazia, but in some cases being willing to engage with it, mostly in unofficial and indirect ways in what is often called 'engagement without recognition'. Geopolitical role, as defined in the Theoretical Framework, is a set of behaviours that reflect the position, importance and ability to project power influenced by material-territorial factors, such as physical location, size, climate, topography, demography, natural resources, and technological factors. It depends on geographical factors as well as on subjective perception and interpretation of these factors (strategic importance ascribed to them) by themselves and other political entities – it thus brings together ideational and material aspects of de facto states' identity. Geopolitical role is a classic example of the fact that "identities become institutionalized and thus part of the

context within which people act” (Klotz & Lynch 2007, 84). They can be empirically observed through looking at institutional practices and the behavioural patterns. To make this more systematic, I have developed a typology of geopolitical roles in Chapter 1.

Ontological security

In Chapter 1, I presented one of the main dilemmas of de facto states - what do they gain if they wrest the territory from the parent state but lose their de facto independence to their patron, if they gain security, but lose their identity in the process? – as a question of ontological security, which I defined – borrowing from Giddens (1991, 243) – as a “sense of continuity and order in events.” The concept of ontological security, however, presents challenges to operationalisation, one of them being its relative novelty and a limited (yet quickly growing) number of cases it has been applied to.

As Klotz & Lynch (2007, 17) state that constructivists understand ‘security’ as “a relationship historically conditioned by culture rather than an objective characteristic determined by the distribution of military capabilities.” They consequently favour methodologies acknowledging “contingency and context.” Unfortunately, they do not proceed to give examples of such methodologies. Steele (2008, 11) is more concrete as he states that “even if this is an incomplete practice for measuring “ontological security,” until we develop a method to read the minds of decision-making groups, analysis of discursive consciousness is the best we can do, and it is a large improvement on existing assumptions made by social scientists about actor motivations.” I do not agree with Steele here; through discourse analysis it is only possible to see the ideal image (ontological security), while through interviews with decision-makers you get to understand both the idea as well as the practice and a more complete picture including incoherencies (ontological insecurity) can be assembled. Mitzen’s approach to ontological security consisting of “operationalizing the modes of routinization in security dilemmas” (Mitzen 2006, 364) and Pratt’s relational understanding of ontological security, which “implies that actors seek not to secure the coherence and stability of self in particular, but rather of their broader social context” are much more promising. Having decided that the North American version of Constructivism

focusing on routines (action) rather than narratives (discourse) is more relevant to my research project, this inevitably shapes how I proceed to operationalize the concept of ontological security.

Keeping in mind the above, ontological security can be translated into this operational definition: ontological security allows to structure our understanding of disparate and ever-changing state interests into a more coherent whole and thus presents the missing link between identity and interests.¹⁰¹ Key elements of ontological security are status (recognition, partial recognition or non-recognition), and interaction (from isolation to extensive and intensive engagement). Both status and interaction are liable to change and both shape identity. The more the status and the level of interaction are deemed sufficient and are stable across time, the more the state is ontologically secure. Ontological security can be operationalized by connecting these various components to empirical realities. Status can be observed empirically by counting the number of international recognitions of Abkhazia and comparing them across time, and by judging their quality and relevance (recognition by Russia and Nauru are not worth the same) of recognitions. The level of interaction can be gauged from press statements of Abkhazian MFA, its size and activity, the presence in Abkhazia of foreign NGOs, the presence of Abkhazian delegations abroad at trade fairs and other economic and cultural events (observable through participant observation and interviews with foreign policy actors in Abkhazia, but also their counterparts in Russia, the EU and the US).

Data collection

In this section I want to discuss what kind of data was collected and how I went about doing it. As Lamont & Swidler (2014, 14) put it: “different methods shine under different lights and that one should choose the most appropriate data

¹⁰¹ When discussing identity and collective aspirations (Realists would talk of national interest), it is good to remember that “regardless of whether researchers concentrate on individual or collective agency, constructivists need to denaturalize the conflation of identities and interests” (Klotz & Lynch 2007, 85). It is therefore not permissible to equate identity with interest, but also wrong to completely detach one from another. It is, however, fair to say that identity and interest are inexorably linked and affect each other. According to Klotz & Lynch (2007, 41) this is through a ‘constructivist ontology of mutual constitution’, which is itself very difficult to operationalise.

collection technique based on the question being asked and the types of facts and theories one wants to operate with.” My research is a case study and this method necessitates using several different sources of data, which may include “structured, semi-structured or open interviews, field observations or document analysis” (Gray 2004, 129). Indeed, I rely on two types of data mentioned: semi-structured (elite) interviews and, to a lesser extent, document analysis. Because of its multiple sources, a case study can generate a lot of data, which can overwhelm the researcher (Gray 2004, 130–131). It is therefore crucial to make data collection focused on answering the narrowly defined research question (Roselle & Spray 2012, 32–33) while not putting on the blinders that would prevent us from understanding the relevant context. This focusing is itself an iterative process, as described by Gillham (2000, 25): “As the data collection progresses (and accumulates) you will move from gathering data to making more focused, selective decisions about what you are going to concentrate on.”

Interviews

As mentioned, my case study research depends largely on interview data and it is in this section that I discuss in more detail how I planned and conducted my semi-structured, elite interviews. The interview is the most commonly used research tool in social and political science (Morris 2009, 209) and the semi-structured interview is the cornerstone of case study research and can be the richest source of data. Its simplicity can, however, be deceptive (Gillham 2000, 65). Elite interviews are conducted with people “in a position of authority, or especially expert or authoritative, people who are capable of giving answers with insight and a comprehensive grasp of what it is you are researching” (Gillham 2000, 63–64). I have decided to conduct semi-structured elite interviews conducted with representatives of political elites in Abkhazia and corresponding decision makers dealing with Abkhazia in European institutions, Russian Federation and United States. I conducted 32 interviews in total, 13 of them in Sukhum/i, 2 in Tbilisi, 3 in Moscow, 6 in Brussels and 4 in Washington D.C., 2 in New York and 2 over Skype. I first conducted interviews in Abkhazia before going to Moscow, Brussels and Washington. Elite interviewing has been chosen as the main method, because it is the best way of getting the data on how non-

recognition is interpreted by politicians and policy-makers and how this informs and affects the formulation of foreign policy objectives and strategies. Decision-makers (who are part of the political elite) are the best placed to provide insight into policy making and semi-structured interview is the best way of extracting rich (Gillham 2000, 62), but focused information from them.

Two of the most important questions regarding elite interview planning are sampling (selection of interviewees) and access. Flick (2007, 30) notes that sometimes it is hard to determine in advance who the best interviewees to answer your questions are. Although 'sampling' implies that selection of interviewees can be done in the beginning and once and for all, qualitative research practice shows that it is usually an iterative process. In other words, when sampling for elite interviews, it is not so much about ensuring a representative sample as in large-n case studies, which rely on structured interviews, but more about having an idea what kind of information we want to acquire and what kind of individuals we must approach to acquire that information. In-depth knowledge of interviewees is the most important factor in succeeding at elite interviews (Mikecz 2012, 491). Getting to know potential interviewees by reading their interviews, publications, public statements, asking other people, plays an important role in sampling (deciding whether the person in question is relevant and would make a good interviewee) and in "gaining access, trust and establishing rapport" (Mikecz 2012, 491).¹⁰² The main criteria for selection in my research is interviewee's relevance to my topic (direct involvement in foreign policy development, implementation or assessment), degree of influence he/she has over the formation of foreign policy (influence), his/her experience (seniority), his/her ability to openly express views (e.g. by seeking people no longer in positions of power who might be more open and have more time for questions). The aim of selecting these criteria is to get honest, informed and informative answers from people well placed to provide insight into the aims and conduct of foreign policy. In line with my prior ethical

¹⁰² Gray (2004, 222–223) defines rapport as "understanding, one established on a basis of respect and trust between the interviewer and respondent. To establish a rapport, it is particularly important to make the respondent relaxed and to get the interview off to a good start." If there is little rapport, the interview can be cut short or the interviewee may refuse to answer questions (Gray 2004, 223). In creating rapport with elites, Mikecz (2012, 492) believes the researcher's positionality is key and is positively influenced by preparation so that it evolves throughout the course of data collection.

commitments, criteria, such as gender, race, age, social condition or sexual preference played no role in the selection of the participants. Interviewees were not paid and have not received any reimbursements. I was constantly aware of the threat of bias in selecting participants. Seidman (2006, 40), has pointed out that more accessible people are not necessarily the most relevant or representative (Gillham 2000, 30–31) and especially beginner interviewers often seek “the easiest path to their potential participants. They often want to select people with whom they already have a relationship” (Seidman 2006, 40). That is why when gaining access in elite interviewing, I have followed Harvey’s (2010, 203) advice that “in gaining access, researchers should try and pursue as many avenues as possible, including using their own social networks. Researchers should also think about how their positionality, such as their institutional affiliation, may affect their ability to gain access to elite members.” I have drawn on my social network of researchers and NGO representatives to identify gatekeepers and potential interviewees much like Kopeček, Hoch, Baar (2016, 92) have described their fieldwork in Abkhazia:

“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.”

Another inroad was provided by a British academic who introduced me to senior decision-makers in Abkhazia, including the then acting Minister of foreign affairs and several of his predecessors. Yet another gatekeeper was an employee of Abkhazian MFA, who I met at an international conference several years. I also conducted informative interviews useful to inform myself of the wider political, social, economic and cultural context and to identify other interviewees. I spoke with journalists, professors, environmentalists, and representatives of the civil society. I was very satisfied with the interviews in Abkhazia, both in terms of

access to policy-makers (including several high-level interviewees) keen on sharing their point of view, and the quality of the data. I was equally happy with the interviews in the US, which turned up useful information on representation of and lobbying on behalf of Abkhazia in the US (discussed in detail in Chapter 6). The interviews in Brussels were in line with my expectations but the interviewees were a bit more diplomatic and less outspoken. Both in the US and the EU, I was mainly able to speak to mid-level diplomats and more senior think tank employees (most of them with policy experience) and those who used to work on Abkhazia but no longer do, proved to be the most valuable sources. The interviews in Russia were very difficult to obtain, likely due to the political tensions between Russia and the West (with which I was inevitably associated), but also smaller network of contacts there and greater cultural and linguistic barriers. I did manage to conduct three interviews with Russian diplomats, but two of them on the condition of them being strictly off-record.

In practical terms of conducting interviews, I've made use of Seidman's (2006) advice on conducting interviews, namely to: 1) Listen More, Talk Less, 2) Follow Up on What the Participant Says, 3) Follow Up, but Don't Interrupt, 4) Keep Participants Focused and Ask for Concrete Details, 5) Follow Your Hunches. To ensure validity (unity of approach and consistency of data gathered), I asked a few same questions in every interview (tailored to each interviewee) as "the issue of validity can be directly addressed by attempting to ensure that the question content directly concentrates on the research objectives" (Gray 2004, 219). To explore the context, a few questions in the interview that were specific to the interviewee. I tried to keep a balance between using the same method to increase the similarity of the research situations "so that differences in the data can more likely be drawn back to differences in the interviewees (their attitudes towards something, for example) rather than to the differences in the situation of data collection" (Flick, 2007, 42–43) and the fact that "very good interviews always profit from the flexibility of the researchers to adapt their questions to the individual participant and to the course of the concrete interview." (Flick, 2007, 64). Seeking prior consent from my interviewees, I have used my mobile phone to record most interviews. This had the benefits of accurately recording interview data while allowing me to focus on listening what my interviewees had to say

(Gray 2004, 227). Finally, I have tried as far as possible to be a participant-observer in addition to being an interviewer. Often the location of the interview, dress code, body language and other perceptible elements provide clues that may prove valuable in the analysis of interview data. Especially as interviews with elites and even more with diplomats tend to be quite formal “becoming a temporary member of the setting /.../ you are more likely to get to the informal reality” (Gillham 2000, 28). I’ve tried to do this through taking mental notes to capture moments and events, “to draw as detailed a mental picture as possible for later recording” (Ruane 2005, 170).

Policy documents and WikiLeaks

I have already put textual analysis to use by applying it to secondary sources during my literature review (academic literature, expert reports, and media reports). In this phase of my research, I mainly focussed on textual analysis of primary (legal documents, official speeches, public statements, and leaked confidential correspondence). As Bowen (2009, 28) notes, document analysis is often combined with other qualitative methods with the data being triangulated (several methods applied to the same research problem). In my case, too, I used document analysis as a complementary approach to triangulate interview data and for process tracing of Abkhazia, Russian, EU, and US foreign policies across time. I discuss the sources and selection of textual and documentary data in this section and its analysis in the next.

In the case of Abkhazia, I gathered the majority of my data through interviews. Because Abkhazia does not have diplomatic relations with many states, there are few official foreign policy documents and many of them not publicly available. When I was conducting interviews in Abkhazia in January 2015, I was told that the Foreign Policy Concept is in the making, but it has not been released since. Therefore, the main additional sources for triangulating interview data were the public statements published by ApsnyPress (the state press agency of Abkhazia) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Abkhazia.

When it comes to Russia, my expectation that there was significantly less interview data, turned out to be correct. This is so because the policy-makers in

Russia were less accessible. Fortunately, Russia and Abkhazia have official diplomatic relations, and these are well documented. For instance, Medvedev's Statement On Russia's Recognition Of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (August 26, 2008), the Agreement on a joint Russian military base in Abkhazia (17 February 2010), Agreement on the trade of goods (28 May 2012), the Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership (23 December 2014) are all valuable documents for the study of Russian-Abkhaz relations. Furthermore, statements published on the websites of ITAR-TASS (the state press agency of the Russian Federation), the President (www.kremlin.ru), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Russian Federation, are also useful complementary sources.

Much like with Abkhazia, with the EU, I also gathered most of my data through interviews. Since none of the EU member states recognises Abkhazia, there few official documents that touch upon these largely informal links. Public statements concerning Abkhazia are sometimes published on the homepage of the EEAS, but these usually just reiterate EU's support for Georgia's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, condemning the recognition of Abkhazia by other states. In addition to the interviews, which explored the under-the-radar interactions between EU and Abkhazian officials, I turned to notable policy papers on 'EU's engagement without recognition' by Cooley & Mitchell (2010), Caspersen & Herrberg (2010), Popescu (2011), Hoch (2011), Ker-Lindsay (2015), Kerselidze (2015), and Fischer (2016).

Finally, in the case of the US, I expected to find least evidence on relations and interactions with Abkhazia from interviews. As I had less access to decision-makers than in the EU, also due to the recent change in the US Presidency. Nevertheless, I did obtain solid data on the informal links between US and Abkhazian officials. Fortunately, some of this can then be triangulated with the help of leaked US diplomatic cables, the confidential correspondence available through WikiLeaks. Berg & Pegg (2016) have used WikiLeaks as a source of data for examining US interaction with de facto states. While their data is useful in triangulating my interview data, my interview data adds some detail to the interaction from the perspective of those who engaged in it on behalf of Abkhazia.

Data analysis

The next step after data collection is to analyse the data. It should be noted, however that data collection and data analysis are often not subsequent but concurrent. Researchers often analyse and interpret data even during an interview to adapt to the flow of the discussion and after the interview to analyse and adjust for next interviews. Data analysis is itself an important part of data collection that helps us determine the point at which “data collection has to virtually stop and will have been winding down for some time before that. Somehow you have to reduce this mass of data” (Gillham 2000, 25). My semi-structured interview data was non-standardized, which means that qualitative analysis is most appropriate (Gray 2004, 215). Qualitative analysis can be defined as a “rigorous and logical process through which data are given meaning.” This is done through “disaggregating the data into smaller parts, [to] see how these connect into new concepts, providing the basis for a fresh description” (Gray 2004, 319).

Transcription and translation

Before any analysis can take place, before data can be broken down and rearranged, data first must be put into a format amenable to the analysis. Interviews must be transcribed and – if not in the same language as the thesis (as in my case) – translated. As Gillham (2000, 71) points out, it is impossible to study interview data if it is not in written form. Furthermore, interviews must be annotated and some sort of quick reference system (in my case colour-coding) established. Further, verbatim transcriptions of interviews must be converted into a more relevant and manageable set of data by identifying “*substantive* statements that really say something” (Gillham 2000, 71). It is a good practice to carry out transcription as soon as possible after the interview as the details are still fresh in the memory (Gillham 2000, 71; Mack et al. 2005, 84). One of the problems with interview data is its quantity. As Gillham (2000, 65–66) notes, “even one interview generates a huge amount of work for the researcher.” Hancock & Algozzine (2006, 56) believe that to deal with this difficulty, it is necessary to “remind oneself of the fundamental research questions being

explored in the study. Each new piece of information should be examined in light of these fundamental questions.”

I have used the services of a translator to transcribe my interviews and translate them from Russian to English. The main reason is that my spoken Russian (I have conducted interviews in it) is much better than my written Russian. I made every effort to still ensure anonymity and to protect the confidential information of my interviewees and have signed a non-disclosure agreement as an annex to the contract with the translator. The translator was carefully chosen: a Russian native speaker fluent in English, with a post-graduate degree in Political Science, high moral integrity, and with absolutely no relation to the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict. In line with the advice by Mack et al. (2005, 84) that “when the transcriptionist is not the person who collected the recorded data, the interviewer or focus group moderator who did collect it should review completed transcripts for accuracy.” I have thus checked all transcripts and translations for accuracy and made corrections where necessary. The translator was only sent the recordings of questions and answers without any personal information of the interviewees and has not had access to the ‘key’. The non-disclosure agreement also stipulated that the translator had to destroy all recordings after the transcripts and translations are made. I’ve taken additional measures to protect my interviewees’ anonymity. Electronically stored data (audio recordings of interviews and interview transcripts) was first stored on a voice recorder and then transferred to a personal password-protected laptop computer. During fieldwork (in situ), back-up copies of electronic data were stored on a USB stick, and kept in a locked room. After coming from the field, electronic data was transferred to a password-protected external drive. Paper-based data (interview transcripts and notes) were stored in a locked room during fieldwork and in a locked unit in a locked room after coming from the field. 5-years after the completion of the research project, the data will be destroyed.

Analysis of policy documents, triangulation, and process tracing

An important early step of data analysis is developing structures that systematically arrange data, for instance categories and typologies (Flick, 2007,

59). This systematisation of data later allows to identify patterns, variables, and possible causal relations between them. At this step data merging also happens: interview data is merged with data collected with other methods, such as document analysis. However, this merger is rarely smooth and unproblematic. The results may be compatible or discrepant. What people say and do might be at odds with what records show. If it does not add up, it does not mean that data is wrong, but that the relationship either does not exist or needs to be understood differently. This must be determined through triangulation (Gillham 2000, 29–30).

The reason why document analysis is useful when combined with interview data is because “documents can provide data on the context within which research participants operate—a case of text providing context, if one might turn a phrase” (Bowen 2009, 29–30). They provide supplementary research data that may or may not be complementary. In case it is, it strengthens the interview data and allows for stronger conclusions. In case documentary analysis yields different data from those coming from the interviews, triangulation is necessary. This can either be done by clarifying interview data (second interview, follow-up questions), or it can inform questions for future interviews (Bowen 2009, 30). To put it in a nutshell, quality of research doesn't only depend on quality of collected data and the quality of the analysis, but also on how different bits of data are assembled together. As Henri Poincaré (1905) famously stated: “Science is built of facts the way a house is built of bricks: but an accumulation of facts is no more science than a pile of bricks is a house.”

Documents are also useful in tracking change and development (Bowen 2009, 30). Published at a specific point in the past and generally immutable, they are a good way to corroborate interview data, which mostly relies on memories, which can be inaccurate, temporally unspecific, and can change through time. Furthermore, when there are various drafts of a single document, one can compare them amongst themselves and identify even subtle changes that can reflect changes in a project's development (Bowen 2009, 30). A good example is the draft Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership, which was leaked to the public. A modified agreement was later signed, reflecting Abkhazia's dissatisfaction with

some provisions of the first draft (Ambrosio & Lange 2015). It is important to consider the context in which the document has been produced: its creators, purpose, audience (Bowen 2009, 33). Sometimes the document can act as a primary source and the role of the interview is in finding out more about this context.

Process-tracing (of foreign policy decisions) is a diachronic, processual, historical approach. Process tracing is a good compromise between a more descriptive, idiographic historical account and a more analytical, nomothetic approach. Since my approach is based on understanding and not explaining, process-tracing is not the most important part of my research strategy. However, it fits well with my research design and does offer a valuable possibility of identifying causal links and consequently of greater generalizability of research.¹⁰³ Beach (2016, 8) likens process-tracing to “an electron microscope, it has only a few different uses, but what it does, it does powerfully.” It is a good tool, but best used in conjunction with other methods, as I do in my research. One of the main objections seems to be the fact that process-tracing is often (mis)applied to analyses that would benefit more from a different method (Trampusch & Palier 2016, 2). It is worth noting that process-tracing was originally “employed in cognitive and psychological studies on individual decision-making” (Trampusch & Palier 2016, 1). As my research puts emphasis on perceptions and decisions of decision-makers, this is quite a good fit. Process-tracing does not just allow the tracing of processes, but also enables us to determine the forms of causal processes, like: causality, convergence, interacting variables, and path-dependence (Bennet et al. 2005, 212). I expect that using process tracing can help determine the form and strength of causal processes and to determine the relationship between the degree of dependency on the parent in the context of sustained non-recognition, and the foreign policy strategies of a de facto state. Most scholars agree that the main strengths of process-tracing are unveiling causal connections and temporal mechanisms (Ruane 2005, 89; Bennet et al. 2005, 206; Beach 2016, 8;

¹⁰³ A constructivist framework does present difficulties in generalizing research but does not preclude it. Even when examining something as subjective as a de facto state’s experience of being unrecognised, we may be surprised how many elements of that experience are shared among de facto states, indicating that difficult choices between isolation and dependence are existentially true for several of them. I discuss this in detail in Chapter 7.

Trampusch & Palier 2016, 2), which opens the possibilities for “further development of theory building and testing in social sciences” (Trampusch & Palier 2016, 15). My research looks at Abkhazia’s foreign relations throughout time and across two periods. I am interested in if and how the changed status has changed decision-makers perceptions and in how changes in perception in turn affected Abkhazia’s foreign policy. Process-tracing may be a powerful way of discovering the connections between these parts of my research puzzle, but I must be careful not to lose sight of the forest for the trees, to be conscious of the significant data required by the method and acknowledge “the epistemological assumptions inherent in its application” (Checkel 2008, 114). As process-tracing is good in identifying interaction and much weaker in defining structural context (Checkel 2008, 116), I only use it after defining the structural context by drawing on my interview and document data.

Validity and limitations

After discussing my research design, the collection and analysis of data, I now explain which measures I took to ensure my research is valid and discuss the limits of it. First, all efforts were made so far to make my research transparent by accurately describing the research process in detail and step-by step. Transparency also makes research externally verifiable. Second, in this section I want to make every effort to provide an objective assessment of the validity of the findings. It is an important ethical principle to be honest about any potential biases and any circumstances that have affected the research and to provide ideas and recommendations on how future research could better be conducted. A distinction is commonly made between internal and external validity (Bennett & Checkel 2015). The question of internal validity is “if the overall research plan or research design is really capable of detecting causal relationships when they exist.” (Ruane 2005, 38). Sometimes this is also referred to as ‘measurement validity’ – making “sure that the variables used in research really do capture the true meaning of the concepts being measured” (Ruane 2005, 50). External validity is usually equated with generalizability of results (Bennett & Checkel 2015, 103–104).

Internal validity

Credibility of research, as internal validity is sometimes called, has been ensured through the following measures. First, an early step towards a good measure and consequently to internal validity is “good conceptualization /.../ the researcher must be sure to clarify the meaning of the concepts as the researcher sees it” (Ruane 2005, 51). I believe I have defined and sufficiently justified the use of my core concepts in the First Chapter and have further clarified and operationalized them in this chapter. I discuss them again in the next chapter, embedded in their historical and cultural context.

Second, I focused my research on as few closely related researches questions as possible, therefore reducing the influx of extraneous variables into the study at a later stage (Engeli et al. 2014), making links between variables clearer and more easily observable. I limited my research to a single case (Abkhazia) and to the period between 1999 and 2014. My research is influenced by constructivist research methodology and is more interpretative than explanatory, which means seeking causal relations between variables is not its main purpose. I am, however, interested in relations between interpretations of status by political elites and foreign policy behaviour, but I expect to find these relations to be more in terms of shaping perceptions and influencing foreign policy behaviour than in terms of one causing the other. Nevertheless, maintaining a sensible focus on the research question – not to lose sight of it but also not to disregard important contextual elements and factors – is important for the internal validity of my research.

Third, measurement validity was verified through triangulation of data from different sources. Interview data was compared to document data. An example of that is the triangulation of interview data acquired in an interview with a former US diplomat with leaked cables accessible through WikiLeaks.

Explanatory weight and generalizability

As Flick (2007, 41) notes, “qualitative research often is not very strongly linked to generalization issues.” However, he goes on to state that “even in a case study,

we assume that its findings will be relevant beyond the specific situation if they apply to “the life of the case beyond the research situation” (Flick 2007, 41). This is indeed my position too. The decision not to make external generalizability of results the ultimate goal of my research is not a case of sour grapes. It is a conscious choice since methodological choices are always choices between depth and width, between in-depth interpretation on one and general explanation on the other. Earlier in this chapter I have expressed my reservations towards the current development of the field of de facto states – one of progressively moving from case studies to large(r)-n comparative research with the aim of reaching more generalizable conclusions and constructing a theory of de facto states. This involves including “an increasingly diverse range of subjects” while noting that “entities such as Taiwan and Nagorno- Karabakh may not really be comparable” (Comai 2018, 192). Therefore, I fully agree with Mack et al. (2005, 2) that even though results from qualitative data can mostly be extended “to people with characteristics similar to those in the study population, gaining a rich and complex understanding of a specific social context or phenomenon typically takes precedence over eliciting data that can be generalized to other geographical areas or populations.”

I am aware of the limits to generalizability and conscious that my research is primarily interpretative in character, but my conclusions do have some explanatory weight and are generalizable (discussed in Chapter 7). Maxwell (2005, 115) distinguishes between internal and external generalizability. By internal generalizability he the generalizability of a result or a conclusion “within setting or group studied.” By external generalizability he means generalizability “beyond that setting or group.” I expect my research to have a high degree of internal generalizability due to triangulated data from various sources (elite interviews in Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia, the EU institutions, and the US and document analysis) that capture the empirical reality from various sides and angles. Furthermore, a degree of standardisation of the research situations (Flick, 2007, 42) provides additional validity: my semi-structured elite interviews included a portion of questions that were posed to all interviewees and the execution of interviews (format, length, style) also tried to be as uniform as possible.

Limitations and biases

There are limits and threats of interference to every research and mine is no exception. One limitation both in terms of internal and external validity (and hence also external generalizability) is a small number of cases – in fact it is a single case study. However, this is mitigated by the fact that it is still comparative in two ways: 1) as a within-case study, which looks at two periods 1999-2008 and 2008-2014; and 2) as a comparison of relations Abkhazia has with Russia, the EU, and the US. This has important implications for external validity (discussed in Chapter 7).

In terms of bias, in qualitative social science research, investigator bias (sometimes called researcher effects or researcher bias) is a common interference that may distort or spoil results (Gerring 2012, 160). Roselle & Spray (2012, 10) advise designing research in the most neutral way possible and claim that research coming to unpredicted conclusions often has the potential to be the most valuable and interesting. Additionally, researchers designing a project with desired outcomes in mind, tend to fare worse at identifying relevant explanatory variables. In other words, it is important to keep an open mind throughout the research process, be ready to shed assumptions and not jump to conclusions. Another type of bias can be present on the other side – in interviewees and even implicit in documents analysed.¹⁰⁴ On my part, every effort has been made to reduce researcher's bias by being reflexive about my research, discussing my approach with my supervisor and other experts in the field, considering their doubts, suggestions and interpretations, relying on different and diverse sources of information and cross-checking them regularly.

When it comes to interviewees, I have already addressed the threat of sampling bias (Hay 2016, 15) earlier in this chapter in the section 'Interviews'. Harvey (2011, 439) warns of the danger that elites might try to control the interview, be willing to answer some questions and reject others. It is important to prepare for this by reading up in advance the people I was going to interview and on subjects

¹⁰⁴ A common bias is 'attribution bias': "a cognitive error in which one assumes that one's own group is good by nature and only does bad things when forced to do so, while the opponent does bad things because it is inherently bad" (Neack 2014, 171).

that are likely to arise in the conversation. I also refused to let go of the thread of the discussion and would persistently but politely bring my interlocutors back to the question. I have already hinted at the importance of emotions (explored in more detail in relation to identity, honour, and anxiety in the next chapter). Emotions are both a potential source of bias as well as a potential source of data and insight. However, as Morin & Paquin (2018, 72) note, it is not easy to include emotions into foreign policy research, the main obstacle being methodological: “Presidents and prime ministers refuse to be scrutinized with magnetic resonance imaging apparatus, to lie down on a psychoanalyst’s couch or answer a questionnaire on their affective life.” (Morin & Paquin 2018, 72). Still, I believe it makes sense to note down any observations both to better contextualize the interview data and to be more reflexive about the practice of interviewing itself.

In terms of limitations, I experienced mostly difficulties with data collection: practical difficulties of fieldwork and difficulties related to conducting interviews. Practical difficulties were luckily limited only to my stay in Abkhazia. The first was an almost catastrophic mistake of forgetting my backpack, which included my passport, money, and laptop computer in the marshrutka (shared minivan) immediately upon arrival to Sukhum/i. In my defence, the journey was long and tiring. I have taken a noisy overnight train from Tbilisi to Zugdidi and then two marshrutkas – one to the border at Inguri and the other from the border to the capital, waking up upon arrival in Sukhum/i after a sleepless night. After moments of horror and despair, the situation turned to be a blessing in disguise. I immediately went to the market to inquire where marshrutkas normally go after completing the drive and was directed to the train station. On my way I met a kind man who called me a taxi – I have just met the deputy mufti of Abkhazia. Taking a taxi to the train station at the edge of the town, I inquired with marshrutka drivers, describing the van and the driver, but they were unable to help me. Returning to the centre, I decided to have breakfast first and look for the bag later. I must have stood out with a mixture of tiredness and despair on my face and was approached by a kind young man, asking me if I needed something. It turned out he was working for the Administration of the President of Abkhazia. In no time at all he was on the phone calling anyone who he could think of, telling them that the Administration of the President is interested in a bag, which a foreigner forgot

in a marshrutka. Thanks to the kindness and help of this person, two hours later I got my bag. I've also met quite a few people that would later be helpful in navigating Abkhazia and arranging interviews. Another practical difficulty worth mentioning, were the frequent electricity blackouts in Abkhazia. As I was told, the low temperatures made the Inguri river freeze, causing the water level in the Inguri dam to drop, reducing electricity generation. I learned that although importing electricity from Russia was an option, it was deemed too expensive by the government. Taking cold showers in sub-zero mornings, eating cold food and preparing for interviews in the dark was unpleasant, but I took my cue from local residents, used to worse and more prolonged blackouts from the past (especially in 1990s), who didn't seem at all bothered and saw it only as a minor nuisance.

Difficulties with data collection were more numerous and diverse. In Abkhazia and Russia, some interviewees were reluctant to speak on record. Others were quite hostile.¹⁰⁵ In one memorable instance, the interviewee arrived with a print-out of an article I have written. Before answering my questions, he would protest my use of the term 'de facto state' in the article:

"It doesn't exist in the international law. Read all the texts. There is no such notion. So why use it in a serious political analysis? What are de facto states? Well, states which are not a part of the UN system, fine. Would you call Switzerland a de facto state? It became part of UN only a few years ago. Was it not a functional state before that? There is no such thing as a de facto state in international law. A state exists or does not exist. It is not relative. I would not put too much emphasis on de-facto or de-jure, but on whether it is a functional system" (Interview with Vyacheslav Chirikba).

Due to political reasons (bad relations between Russia and the EU), it was almost impossible to access foreign policy-makers in Russia and despite several attempts impossible to arrange an interview at the Ministry of Defence. This would be difficult for any researcher but coming from a British university and having

¹⁰⁵ In Abkhazia, policy-makers were mostly keen to speak with me but also often very opinionated. Sometimes I was taken as a representative of the West and they would express their grievances to me. In Russia, policy-makers were reluctant to talk to me and, when discussing relations between Russia and the West, came across as quite cynical.

worked for NATO in the past, made it even more so. The data I intended to collect through interviews in Russia thus had to be largely replaced by data from other sources, especially documents. Luckily, due to the existence of formal diplomatic relations between Abkhazia and Russia, these are quite plentiful.

When accessing interviewees in European Institutions, the problems were different. Several times when contacted, potential interviewees would declare themselves not competent to speak about the topic (which to be honest is a hot potato) and suggest I contact their colleague. In one memorable instance, the referrals and redirections came full circle, so that the person I initially contacted then agreed to an interview. In Abkhazia and Russia, I observed that lower-ranking officials would, out of respect for their superiors and the hierarchy, almost always refer me to their bosses (even if these were less knowledgeable of the topic). In the European Commission, the EEAS and the European Parliament the opposite trend of referring me to lower-ranking officials (typically desk officers) was at play.

Interviews conducted in the US were done at an unfortunate time, just weeks after Trump has been elected. The State Department seemed to be in flux and policy-makers seemed preoccupied with their own worries, namely job security. It was difficult to gain access to people in official positions, but easier to approach past office holders. Since my research looks at the period between 1999 and 2014, that was another blessing in disguise. Finally, a recurring challenge independent of the place of the interview, was that some interviewees were interested in who I talked so far and what they said. Remembering the warning by Mack et al. (2005, 11) that although it might be tempting to share seemingly innocent and unimportant information from one participant to the other (like a piece of news or a funny statement), this should be avoided at all costs. Consequently, I was conscious to avoid this pitfall and refused to answer questions regarding other interviewees to protect the privacy of all interviewees.

Ethical considerations

Mack et al. (2005, 8) differentiate between research ethics and professional ethics – both are relevant ethical considerations in the wider process conducting

research. While research ethics deal mostly with the interactions between the researcher and research participants, professional ethics mostly concern “collaborative relationships among researchers, mentoring relationships, intellectual property, fabrication of data, and plagiarism, among others.” (Mack et al. 2005, 8).

One of the most important methodological and ethical principles is transparency so I want to lay out the ethical principles on which I have based my research (Flick 2007, 69):

1. Informed consent means that no one should be involved in research as a participant without knowing about this and without having the chance of refusing to take part.
2. Deception of research participants (by covert observation or by giving them false information about the purpose of research) should be avoided.
3. Participants’ privacy should be respected, and confidentiality should be guaranteed and maintained.
4. Accuracy of the data and their interpretation should be the leading principle, which means that no omission or fraud with the collection or analysis of data should occur in the research practice.
5. In relation to the participants, respect for the person is seen as essential.
6. Beneficence, which means considering the well-being of the participants.
7. Justice, which addresses the relation of benefits and burdens for the research Participants.

Mack et al. (2005, 9) define *informed consent* as “a mechanism for ensuring that people understand what it means to participate in a particular research study, so they can decide in a conscious, deliberate way whether they want to participate.” (Mack et al. 2005, 9). In acquiring informed consent, I followed the best practice of preparing information sheets and interview agreements (Flick, 2007, 72), which described my research project, explained its purpose and the interview format. I expected that most interviewees in Abkhazia, Russia, and possibly in Georgia, have a poor knowledge of English, which proved to be true. Most interviews were conducted in Russian. This means that the information sheets and consent forms

were first be drafted in English and then translated into Russian before being given to the participants. The research has involved *no deception* of participants of any kind. Interviewees were given an opportunity to ask questions and finally asked to mark to whether they have read the information sheet, understand that participation in the interview was entirely voluntary and confidential. They were also asked to mark whether they consent to taking part in the study, to having the interview recorded (it was possible to reject recording and still take part in the study), I also asked them if and how they wish to be quoted in the thesis and whether it is possible to identify them with their full name or perhaps just with their position.

Anonymity, if requested, was achieved by pseudonyms and broader categories. For instance, an interviewee may prefer to be identified only as a 'former senior government official' or 'MFA employee', or 'interviewee A'. The choice of pseudonym could be agreed with the interviewee with the pseudonym protected by encrypted keys. In case anonymity was requested, I made sure that their identity is not apparent from the context, and that any identifying information is excluded. These include specificities of time, place, institutional position, affiliation, names of other people mentioned in the interviews, etc. In some cases, anonymity cannot be guaranteed, for instance in case of high-ranking interviewees, who possess unique inside-information, only available to them, which I am referencing. This is especially relevant in such a small and close-knit society as Abkhazia. In such cases, I pointed this out to the interviewees and make sure they understand the implications and that they are comfortable with them. The list of interviewees will be made available to the examiners but will be destroyed after the successful passing of the viva. Participants were informed that they are entitled to refuse to answer any questions and, to end the interview and leave at any time. Finally, they signed the agreement. I must note that one interviewee in Abkhazia and two interviewees in Russia refused to sign the consent sheet but were willing to speak to me informally. Consequently, to respect participants' privacy and guarantee their confidentiality, I have not included data from those interviews, but they were nevertheless helpful for contextualising other interviews. The interviewees were not asked why they did not wish to sign the consent sheet, but one of them did state that they have had

a negative experience of being misquoted and his statements being taken out of context. It is not uncommon in post-Soviet countries for people to be hesitant to sign documents, because this usually implies a legal obligation on their behalf. Signing documents can also be negatively associated with bureaucratic procedures of Soviet Union closely related to corruption, abuse of power and denial of privacy in totalitarian system and a surveillance state. No major issues were expected at this stage and precautions were taken, such as using secure systems of transfer and encrypted systems of storage. Data was analysed only by me, even if the interview recordings were externally transcribed and translated from Russian to English by a trusted person with an academic background. Qualitative analysis started by ordering the recordings by date, venue and the person interviewed, followed by transcribing the audio recordings of interviews and digitalizing interview notes. The relevant parts were translated into English. The most important points were highlighted, and brief interpretative notes were made. Finally, the results of the research will be published as a doctoral thesis, possibly followed by as a book or a series of articles. Participants were asked if they want to be sent an electronic copy of the publication. If so, they were asked to provide an electronic address where this publication will be sent when completed.

Accuracy of the data means “no omission or fraud with the collection or analysis of data should occur” (Flick 2007, 69). In relation to this, *just interpretation* extends the same principles to data interpretation, which should be fair and without bias. These were the fundamental ethical principles I had in mind when approaching data processing and analysis. Despite that, there were ethical challenges associated with *sensitivity and impartiality*, namely regarding the nature of questions I was asking. I was especially careful when posing questions as many topics are politically sensitive and I made sure to approach them with as much sensibility as possible to prevent causing offence, discomfort or distress to participants (interviewees). As some people I interviewed might be affected by the worsening relations between Russia and the West, I had to be careful to maintain my neutrality and objectivity by not expressing any of my own political views, praising or criticizing any side, person or institution, which might lead my research participants to believe my research is partial. An example of a

challenging question was a question posed to an Abkhaz foreign ministry official, whether they think tight cooperation between Russia and Abkhazia may constrain Abkhazia's ability to conduct independent foreign policy. I needed to be especially careful how such a question was posed as wording, tact, and even intonation was very important. In general, I started my interviews with less difficult and sensitive questions to build trust and would only ask sensitive questions at the end of the interview when I felt that I have established rapport and that the interviewee would be comfortable answering it.

Transparency is not only important when carrying out data collection and analysis, but also when writing up research, so that readers have "enough information to decide whether they would have done the same and arrived at the same conclusions as the researchers or not" (Flick, 2007, 66). Similarly, Moravcsik (2014, 666) writes about three components of research transparency: data transparency, analytic transparency, and production transparency, which rest upon the premise that researchers in social science should make available the full set of their research design choices that produced "the combination of data, theories, and methods they use for empirical analysis." In writing up research, it is also important to maintain the anonymity of interviewees, to be careful when generalizing and conscious of the language used to avoid bias (Flick, 2007, 75).

Risk

Although the risk of doing fieldwork in a post-conflict society did not appear to be a limiting factor on my research, I nevertheless want to briefly discuss the risks involved in conducting my research and how I addressed them. I first talk about risks to research participants, then about risks to myself, the researcher.

Do no harm is an important ethical principle that stipulates the researcher should cause no disadvantage to participants (Flick 2007, 73). The potential risks facing participants are connected to the answers they give in interviews. Since most of the people I interviewed in Abkhazia were elites, many of who are well-known public figures, their statements attract more attention (even if they only appear in the PhD thesis) and are liable to criticism, which can affect their reputation and

career. This, however is not very likely, as most people I interviewed are educated, familiar with interviews and know the limits within which they can speak. Talking about war, conflict, refugees, borders, minorities and other potentially controversial and emotional topics was inevitable and in a post-conflict society people can be expected to have very strong opinions about many of these issues. Some of my questions caused unintentional offence and discomfort, even if phrased very carefully.¹⁰⁶ I tried to mitigate this risk by starting with easier questions, building trust through the interview, and with paying close attention to the verbal and non-verbal signs of any discomfort of the interviewee. In case of doubt, I asked if the person is comfortable to talk about a certain topic before posing the questions. There are not only risks, but also potential benefits to participants. People in de facto states often feel isolated, let down by the international community that seems uninterested in their views and problems. It is in the interest of elites, especially government officials to talk to foreign researchers and journalists to present their side of the story and thus gain visibility for their cause. Indeed, elites in Abkhazia were very accessible and quite eager to share their views with me. This might also be due to better access to gatekeepers and a smaller and more tightly-knit society in comparison with my interviews in Russia, the European institutions, and the US.

Risks faced by the researcher are risks connected with Abkhazia's status as a largely unrecognised state, meaning no EU diplomatic support and assistance are available on the ground. I am not sure how one would resolve the case of a lost passport (which almost happened to me) without the possibility of consular support. There are also risks inherent to a post-conflict society. These include risks to physical safety, such as the (very small) risk of renewed hostilities along the border and the risk of violent crime. The risk of war is negligible, and the region has been peaceful since 2008.¹⁰⁷ I did not plan to do research near the

¹⁰⁶ An example is the use of the terms 'refugee' and 'IDP' (internally displaced person). The first implies that the person fleeing from conflict has crossed an internationally recognised border, while the second implies that they have not. As territory, borders and the international recognition of Abkhazia are all a matter of dispute, Georgians do not accept the term refugee and the Abkhaz do not accept the term IDP. The researcher has two choices. Either he consistently uses one term over the other and can defend his choice when inevitably challenged. The other option is to resort to strategic use of terms depending on the interlocutor.

¹⁰⁷ Abkhazia has experienced a war with Georgia 1992-1993, with hostilities escalating again in 2008. During August 2008 Russian military intervened and Russian troops now control the border

border areas or in the Gal/i region, which has seen violent crime in recent past. I mostly stayed in the capital Sukhum/i. By following the local and international media as well as keeping in close contact with the local population, I made sure I was aware of the security situation any factors that could compromise my security during my stay. Abkhazia (and the Caucasus in general) is socially relatively conservative and anyone doing research there has to pay attention to respect local traditions and customs, including wearing appropriate clothing, adhering to the desired ways of interacting with people: old people should be treated with utmost respect, food and drink, if offered, should not be refused (it is considered an offence) or if done so, thoroughly justified. I made sure to inform myself from books and researchers who have done field work in Abkhazia about the local culture and rules of proper conduct. I believe the potential risks associated with doing fieldwork in Abkhazia were significantly reduced by my knowledge of the wider region and by having personal contacts (including contacts with government officials) in Abkhazia itself. I have a good knowledge of the political situation in Abkhazia and recognise which issues might be sensitive. I am familiar with the region and have visited Georgia, Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan and the Russian republics in the North Caucasus before.

Conclusion

In this chapter I described my research process and explained how I went about answering my research questions. In discussing research design, I justified the selection of my methodology and methods, connecting them to my theoretical framework on one and the empirical data on the other hand. I clarified that my

between Abkhazia and Georgia, with the situation largely stable and without big incidents. However, Abkhazia remains an unrecognised state and a post-war zone, risks to personal security (albeit low) exist. As mentioned previously, there is a lack of consular assistance, but despite this fact, the society is close-knit and having a network of contacts there (as I do) can serve to mitigate these problems and provide help and support in case of emergency. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office does advise against all travel to Abkhazia (<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/georgia>), however this danger is overstated and has a lot to do with the region's unrecognised status and consequentially the parent state (Georgia) insistence on such warnings. The risk of war is very small as the region has been peaceful since 2008, presence of Russian troops makes any provocations and border skirmishes highly unlikely and wars in the Caucasus never start in the winter (when I plan to be carrying out fieldwork) as the rugged terrain is difficult to pass then.

research falls under qualitative, single-case, constructivist study with within-case comparative elements. As such it aims at “*deep understanding* of the actors, interactions, sentiments, and behaviours” (Woodside 2010, 6). As Gerring (2007, 204) states, “regardless of how informative cross-case evidence (either large-N or small-N) might be, one is unlikely to be satisfied that one has satisfactorily explained an outcome until one has explored within-case evidence.” I then operationalized my core concepts of state identity, ontological security, and geopolitical role. In discussing data collection and analysis, most of the focus was on interviews, as they form the cornerstone of my methodology. I also discussed policy document analysis as a complementary approach, especially important for process tracing and data triangulation. In the last part of the chapter I explained what measures were taken to ensure my research design is objective, my methods reliable, and my conclusions valid. I critically assessed the explanatory weight and generalizability of my research. Furthermore, I engaged in an honest discussion of limitations and biases, ethical considerations and risks, providing examples of the fieldwork challenges I have encountered. Indeed, my motive in this chapter was to be as reflexive and as transparent about my methodology, in line with Flick’s (2007, 62) remark that “quality in qualitative research (planning) is based on a clear, explicit and reflected decision for a specific method or design.”

Chapter 4: The foreign policy of Abkhazia

“If you are a state, you are a state. Our goal is not to mimic or deceive the international community about our aims, we are not here to impress anyone. We created our state, actually re-created it, because Abkhazia has initially had statehood.”
– Interview with Viacheslav Chirikba

Introduction

The analysis of the foreign policy of Abkhazia in this chapter is conducted by drawing on the theoretical framework established in the First Chapter (Theoretical Framework), which integrates Realist and Constructivist elements into a coherent theoretical approach to examine the meaning political decision-makers in Abkhazia and actors it interacts with, attach to non-recognition (how they interpret it) and how this affects their foreign policy behaviour.

This chapter is structured by my argument that internal situation in the de facto state and the wider geopolitical considerations influence interpretations of non-recognition by Abkhazian decision-makers, which in turn shape interaction between de facto state and other actors. In this chapter the focus is on foreign policy perceptions and decisions of Abkhazia, while in the following chapters I focus on actors that it has diplomatic relations with (Russia) or that engage with it (EU and US). I first take a look at Abkhazia’s foreign policy constraints and capabilities, including fleshing out the structure of its foreign policy establishment. Afterwards, I look at how Abkhazian identity manifests itself in its foreign policy before looking more closely at the objectives it pursues and the means it uses. Furthermore, I draw on my previously published work (Jakša 2017) on ontological security of post-Soviet de facto states, and finally on the interviews conducted with political elites and decisionmakers in Abkhazia in early 2016. Finally, I present the main findings of my fieldwork in Abkhazia in the form of a thick

description, situate them in existing research, and assess their relevance and validity, and their implications for future research.

Foreign policy constraints and capabilities

In studying the foreign policy of Abkhazia, three works are especially relevant: Frear (2014), Smith (2018), and Comai (2018). These relatively recent texts all deal with the foreign policy of Abkhazia in some detail and I briefly discuss the merits and gaps in these scholarly pieces to review the state of the art and avoid reinventing the wheel before I proceed to discuss the constraints and capabilities of Abkhazia's foreign policy. I briefly summarize their contributions, discuss their limits and link them to my own theoretical framework in Chapter 1, which discussed foreign policy constraints and capabilities in terms of material and ideational factors, employing the concepts of identity, ontological security and geopolitical role.

Frear (2014) makes a useful distinction between formal (inter-state) and informal vectors (diaspora-mediated interactions with Turkey and dialogue between religious institutions). Furthermore, he does a good job distinguishing between the declared objective of attaining recognition and pursuing more short-term objectives, such as attracting investment and forging cultural links. However, he does not say much about cultural and economic diplomacy: dominoes, football (CONIFA), participation at trade fairs, and dancing troupes. Not discussing how culture shapes foreign policy and how foreign policy uses culture as an instrument is one of the major lacunas in the current literature on de facto states. He also discusses the structure of the MFA in some detail and includes contributions on Abkhazia's digital diplomacy as well as issues of content between Abkhazia and Russia and demonstrating that it's not a frictionless relationship. One problem with his account is that, despite conceding that perception is important, he does not discuss anything related to identity or domestic politics: nation-building, state-building, identity, norms, values, *apswara*, ethocracy are not even mentioned.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, there are at least three reasons why this should have been discussed: 1) in de facto states foreign and domestic are interrelated; 2) the insecurity of Abkhaz in their own country (barely 50%); 3) non-recognition has two-fold effects in

Partly due to the constraints of a relatively short paper, he omits such important domestic elements as the 2004 election (Khajimba and Baghapsh), which is significant because the pro-Russian candidate lost the elections, and this speaks of a greater margin of internal political independence than expected. Examining the lacuna of the foreign-domestic nexus, his article tells us nothing about the foreign policy process: how the options are defined, by who, how the decision-making takes place, what instruments are available.

Comai's (2018) research does a good job challenging the area-studies focus, especially when it comes to post-Soviet de facto states, and in particular the 'Eurasian quartet: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. However, his attempt to analyse them using the MIRAB (Migration, Remittances, Aid and Bureaucracy) frame – a model used for explaining how economies of (mostly) island micro states – is not entirely convincing and he has to abstract many key elements to be able to squeeze them into this frame. All this, despite claiming that they are “substantially dissimilar cases, that came into being and developed in very different circumstances. Indeed, non-recognition is one of the few significant features that allows to put in one category territories as strikingly different as Taiwan, Iraqi Kurdistan, and South Ossetia.” (Comai 2018, 19). Comai's research, like Frear's and Florea's lacks extensive references to local particularities - these are recognised as abstractly important, but rarely discussed in-depth. The historical, social and cultural context, so important for understanding de facto states in South Caucasus – a region where culture, tradition, habit, custom play a crucial role, is barely mentioned. Culture and identity are never considered, conceptualized or discussed.¹⁰⁹ It would be wrong to single out Comai for these omissions – they are less of an individual flaw than a symptom of what de facto states literature has generally forgotten or suppressed. His research question, approach and methodology are obviously different than

terms of limiting foreign policy options by virtue of external isolation and by the virtue of decision-makers internalizing this and it then functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

¹⁰⁹ In the full length of the thesis, the word 'identity' appears six times, four of which is in quotations. 'Tradition' appears twice, 'nation-building' and 'perception' once, and there is no mention of apswara, honour, or ethnocracy.

mine and given the number of de facto states analysed, he was only able to conduct a small number of interviews in each case.

Smith (2018) makes an important contribution in introducing the concept of social moves, further explored in this chapter. In social moves, such as 'formal statements of condolences, congratulations, and solidarity', 'naming honorary consuls and representatives', 'participation in international sporting events abroad', the message really is the medium. Smith also makes other important contributions, discussing at some detail Abkhazia's aspirations to join sporting competitions, its education diplomacy and the cultural exchanges it is involved in. While Frear (2014) and Comai (2018) employ a more realist perspective, Smith's (2018) is a more structuralist/constructivist account, a veritable micropolitics perspective that at times feels a bit too far removed from material conditions and the geopolitical reality in which de facto states find themselves in. In Chapter 1, I have briefly discussed foreign policy constraints and capabilities in terms of material and ideational factors, employing the concepts of identity, ontological security and geopolitical role. Identity can be an asset (a source of inspiration, a refusal to quit) or a liability (stigma, fatalism), while the maintenance of ontological security can be based both on strategies (playing geopolitical roles), on tactics (social moves) or defence mechanisms (explored further in chapter 7). There is little determinism and non-recognition truly is what states make of it (as claimed in Chapter 1 and re-asserted in Chapter 7).

Constraining factors

Non-recognition is the most obvious constrain on the foreign policy of Abkhazia. According to Caspersen (2012, 42) Unrecognised states are heavily constrained by non-recognition. Their legal limbo prevents them from: 1) obtaining loans from international creditors; 2) joining international organisations; 3) international laws and regulations being applied on their territory; 4) their citizens (including diplomats) from traveling, and 5) accessing foreign markets. Cooley (2015, 23) adds: 6) participating in sport organisations and taking part in international sport events, and 7) international flights from taking off/landing on their territory. However, these are only the direct obstacles that Abkhazia and its citizens face.

Some are perhaps not necessarily obstacles and can even be blessings in disguise (inapplicability of international laws and regulations on their territory), there are ways around some of them (traveling on a Russian passport), but most are at least a nuisance (inability to take part in international sport events) and at most crippling (access to markets before Russian recognition and during the CIS embargo). It is important to note, however, that the above-mentioned constraints only apply to the *implementation* of the foreign policy. I argue that indirect constraints, which result from non-recognition, also impact the way foreign policy is conceptualised before it is implemented by determining what is considered possible and realistic, how proactive is its posture and with how much confidence it is carried out. The indirect consequence of non-recognition is a self-fulfilling prophecy that limits foreign policy conceptualisation, which I examine later in more detail by analysing how proactive is Abkhazia's foreign policy in relation to Russia (Chapter 5) and the EU and the US (Chapter 6).

Lack of foreign policy (strategy) is another important constraining factor. According to Berg & Vits (2018, 1), there is no unity of opinion on “whether de facto states have their own agency, or if these fledgling states are used as pawns within the context of wider strategic manoeuvring.” Indeed, some scholars have proposed that rather than having foreign policies, de facto states (including Abkhazia) are objects of the patron state's foreign policy. This is not my position and if I agree that Abkhazia does have a foreign policy, the most important question to answer is: to what extent is this an intentional policy that operates at a strategic level and to what extent is it a series of ad hoc reactions on the tactical level, closer to what Zhemukhov described: “Abkhazia’s status has not developed as the result of a consistent foreign policy but rather via a series of accidental international events unconnected to each other” (Zhemukhov 2012, 1).¹¹⁰ According to Isachenko (2012, 3), this corresponds to operating on a tactical rather than the strategic level: “If a strategy can be planned regardless of circumstances, a tactic is characterized by dependency on the circumstances” (Isachenko 2012, 3). Non-recognition in this context is the overriding

¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, it remains unclear what, according to Zhemukov, are these “accidental international events unconnected to each other”.

circumstance, which condemns a de facto state to tactical level, which is the “space of the other”.

Dependence on a small circle of recognisers is the third constraining factor. It has become a truism in de facto state literature to state that Abkhazia’s dependence on Russia has increased after the latter’s recognition. If this is true now, it does not mean that it was true immediately after the recognition or that it will hold true in the years to come. The recognitions of Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and Syria are also often underplayed and explained away as Russian-bought. However, despite the fact that they are not politically or economically significant, they seemed to have added what Frear (2014, 86) describes as “a dynamic to Abkhazian foreign interaction that simply did not exist beforehand, that of an equal party in a bilateral interaction.” Recognitions gave a boost to the preservation of national identity and the foreign policy ambitions of Abkhazia. While Pacher’s (2017, 15) assessment that “without Nauru, Abkhazia’s ontological security would plummet down well into the depths where really unrecognised states such as Transnistria or Somaliland reside,” may over-state the role of this relationship for the ontological security of Abkhazia, it does contribute to it. They saw a window of opportunity and embarked on the project of trying to get other countries to recognise them. Eventually they became disillusioned and more dependent on Russia, but the initial impulse was one of diversification, of multi-vector foreign policy. Their first choice was balancing, when that failed, they went to bandwagoning. Even as dependence increased, the routines and interactions developed in maintaining a network of formal diplomatic relations, preserved Abkhazia’s ontological security.

Similarly, to Zhemukov (2012), Frear (2014, 96), believes that Abkhazia's options are severely limited and that : “the triangular relationship between Abkhazia, Russia and Georgia determines the foreign policy capability of Abkhazia to a far greater extent than dedicated governmental action.” I agree with Frear's assessment, although I believe that in addition to legal, political and economic restraints, cultural and psychological factors (such as already-mentioned shame and fatalism) also restrict Abkhazia's manoeuvring space in foreign policy.

Lack of resources and dependence on Russia are two sides of the same coin, both stemming not only from the fact that Abkhazia is an unrecognised state, but also that it is a small – if not a micro – state. Its resources, including the human and financial resources available to conduct foreign policy, are very limited. It is in fact questionable whether further recognitions and the necessity to maintain those diplomatic relations, would not over-extend its resources. The MFA itself is strained for resources (Comai 2017, 9). Foreign minister Chirikba mentioned the question of resources when considering applying for an observer seat at UNESCO: “We would like to have [an observer seat at UNESCO], but we need assistance, it needs a lot of travelling and a lot of lobbying, a lot of communication. We need financial resources, but also human resources, which we have a limited amount of” (Interview with Viacheslav Chirikba). Track two diplomacy projects with the aim of conflict reconciliation between Georgians and Abkhazians similarly suffer from lack of resources (Interview with Natella Akaba) and insufficient resources to fix and update infrastructure also affect foreign policy as a “lack of legally sanctioned, large capacity, transportation links between Abkhazia and Turkey serves to restrict the effectiveness of Abkhazian efforts at trade diversification.” (Frear 2014, 96). Lack of resources can of course be linked to material factors, such as the small size of the entity and hence to the geopolitical role by which a de facto state tries to make the most of its situation and ‘punch above its weight’.

Capabilities

Despite the severe limitations, there are some resources Abkhazia was able to draw on in its foreign policy, starting with the MFA and diaspora, and ending with Russia, which is both an asset but also a liability.

Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The MFA is the central and most important actor in shaping, coordinating and implementing Abkhazia's foreign policy (Comai 2018, 204). In this section, I examine its structure, staffing and role.

Structure

Frear (2014, 86) outlines the basic structure and functions of the MFA of Abkhazia: “The structure and operations of the Abkhazian MFA are, by necessity, small in scale. Aside from a series of small departments dedicated to administration (such as translation and legal matters there are four key departments concerned with external engagement.”¹¹¹ In addition to three embassies (in Russia Venezuela and South Ossetia), Abkhazia “maintains a network of Honourary Consuls, Plenipotentiary Representatives, and ‘ambassadors at large’.” (Frear 2014, 86). Restructuring that took place during Vyacheslav Chirikba has changed the structure of the MFA and the regional departments were formed: Europe, the US, and Canada; Turkey and the Middle East; Latin America; Asia-Pacific countries; as well as the department of the CIS countries, Russia, and Georgia. In the past, before the restructuring, there was a separate international division. Today, its function is performed by the Department of Europe, the US, and Canada. This department now covers relations with international organizations and UN agencies that are represented in Abkhazia. “We are constantly in contact with them, we hold meetings, we inform them about decisions of the foreign ministry, and it is through our department that the minister communicates with them, as well as the neighbouring ministers” (Interview with Arthur Gagulya¹¹²). As mentioned later in this Chapter, the MFA has a very tight relationship with the media and has a strong influence over what they report on. An important element related to the MFA is also the Public Expert Council at the MFA of Abkhazia, which was created to conduct expert assessments and provide recommendations to the MFA (Report From A Meeting of Newly Established Public Expert Council 2012).

¹¹¹ These are: (1) the Department of the Russian Federation, the CIS, Nagorny Karabakh, Transnistria, Georgia, and South Ossetia; (2) the Department of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific; (3) the Department for Europe, the US, and Canada; and (4) the Department for Turkey and the Middle East. The heads of these departments act on the strategic direction determined by the Foreign Minister and the two Deputy Ministers. Day-to-day departmental duties involve providing written briefs for Abkhazia’s foreign representatives and coordinating their activities with governmental policy (Gagulya 2014)

¹¹² Arthur Gagulya was the Head of the Department for the European Union, the US, and Canada at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia when this interview was conducted.

Staffing

Predictably, the MFA is not large. Most departments have 2-3 people. For instance, the EU, US and Canada department has 2 employees and the plan is to hire another person so that there is one head and two subordinates (Interview with Arthur Gagulya). The department monitors international events related to its area but due to limited resources and the fact that none the actors in the region recognise Abkhazia, can do little else: “De facto, we exist. We are visible. But legally, we do not exist for them. Accordingly, it is very difficult to get in contact with them and get any agreement, discuss anything openly and officially” (*ibid.*). In terms of its ‘diplomatic corps’, only three internationally recognised states (Russia, Venezuela, and Nicaragua) posted their ambassadors to Abkhazia, but only the Russian one is a resident ambassador, while the other two reside in Moscow (Toomla 2013, 60-61). The limited human and financial resources at the disposal of the MFA “ impacts their outreach capacity equally as much as their non-recognition.” (Comai 2017, 9).

Role

In addition to being the most important actor in shaping and implementing Abkhazia's foreign policy, the MFA is also one of the most important ministries in the government, its priorities extending beyond foreign policy, involving contacts with the Abkhaz diaspora and conflict negotiations in Geneva (Comai 2018, 192). The role of diaspora in foreign policy is important, but it seems to be instrumentalized more for changing the ethnic composition inside Abkhazia (through repatriation programs) than merely connecting it with the outside world (Berg & Vits 2018, 13). This is yet another indicator of how important ontological security is to the Abkhazians. The MFA also plays the role of the “middle-man” that mediates “interactions between certain state institutions and international organisations; for example, if the tax service needs information on a contract that involves international organisations, they would request it through the MFA.” (Comai 2018, 205). The MFA also cooperates closely with the University in Sukhum/i with half of its graduates in International Relations working in the MFA and two internships held yearly for graduates” (Interview with Alik Gabelia). In addition, the MFA cooperates with educational institutions in Russia and every

year five students study at Russian MFA's MGIMO in Moscow on a scholarship (Comai 2018, 162). All this reaffirms my claim that in Abkhazia there is a weak distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' and a strong link between foreign and domestic policies. I look at the cooperation between Abkhazian MFA and Russia more closely in the following section.

Diaspora

The Circassian umbrella organization KAFFED and the Abkhaz diaspora network Abhaz-Fed have played a key role in facilitating the visits of Abkhaz delegations to Turkey and in bringing members of Turkish political and economic elites to Abkhazia (Smolnik & Weiss 2017, 13). Because of the growing trade and other contacts between Abkhazia and Turkey operated through diasporic networks, and growing relations with Georgia, Turkey faced a difficult dilemma in developing a policy towards Abkhazia (Cornell 2001, 276). It is, however, safe to state that Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey is a significant asset to Abkhazia, but that Turkey has tried to keep Turkish-Abkhaz low-key and under the radar, giving clear priority to the relations with its recognised neighbour – Georgia.

Russian assistance

The main question in the relations between Abkhazia and Russia concerning foreign policy is whether these relations constitute foreign policy coordination (as Russia and Abkhazia say), high degree of dependence (as seen in the EU and by the majority of scholars) or even complete control (as stated by Georgia, and often followed by the US). I would argue that in addition to dependence and coordination, relations of tutelage and assistance with practical matters are also important. According to Comai (2018, 162), the Abkhazian MFA benefits from Russian support as its members attend trainings at the Russian MFA's Diplomatic Academy and consult with Russian experts and policy-makers." Nevertheless, the first minister of foreign affairs, Sokrat Jinjolia believes Abkhazia has quite a bit of autonomy in deciding and conducting its foreign policy: "some in Russia have made attempts to integrate Abkhazia into Russia, but it certainly is not supported here. They understand that. The 2004 elections were very demonstrative in relations between Russia and Abkhazia" (interview with Sokrat

Jinjolia). Another former foreign minister of Abkhazia, Viacheslav Chirikba, is of a similar opinion:

“I think we have very good modus operandi with Russia, we are not subordinated to anybody, not coordinating with them all the activities but some which can touch upon their interests. There are some things which are for mutual importance, but for the rest we decide ourselves, apply ourselves, for me it's the most important to have the approval of my president” (Interview with Viacheslav Chirikba).

And yet, approval seeking seems to flow from MFA to the president, but not necessarily from other political institutions to the MFA. Although there is a law obliging Abkhazian representatives to report to the MFA, it is consistently broken (Comai 2018, 206). This is yet another proof of the weak division between foreign and domestic spheres in Abkhazia, but also of the lack of a more comprehensive foreign policy strategy, which I explore next.

Identity and foreign policy of Abkhazia

At the end of Cold War, identity - and especially ethnic and national identity - have become very important and due to ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and the Caucasus, proved to be very useful in studying the politics there. As I have argued in Chapter 1, examining state and national identity can help us explain their foreign policy. At the same time, looking at how they interact with other actors, can tell us more about what de facto states are but also how they are perceived by others and how it affects their identity and self-perception.¹¹³

¹¹³ Non-recognition casts a stigma on de facto states that tends to undermine their agency in the view of international observers. The interactions of de facto states with other actors are therefore often termed foreign relations, external relations, even para-diplomacy or sub-diplomacy. However, a state can exist politically even if it does not exist legally (has no status in international law). As the Article 3 of the Montevideo Convention, which stipulates: "The political existence of the state is independent of recognition by other states." In this chapter, I depart from the standpoint that Abkhazia does have a foreign policy and in Chapters 5 and 6 further discuss the evidence for its proactiveness vis-à-vis Russia, the EU and the US.

State identity in Abkhazia

There is a plethora of expressions for the identity of the state.¹¹⁴ To avoid getting drawn into a theoretical discussion that could run the length of a book, let's postulate, as we did in the First Chapter, that if a state is composed of population and territory, then *state identity* consists of *national identity* and *geopolitical identity* (which I call *geopolitical role*).

First, I examine the two elements of state identity – national identity and geopolitical role and then I look at how these shape foreign policy objectives, strategies and instruments and what bearing they have on Russian-Abkhaz, Abkhazian-EU and Abkhazian-US relations.¹¹⁵

National identity and foreign policy

I have already discussed Morin & Paquin's (2018, 261) definition of national identity in Chapter 1. In the following section, I examine in more detail each of its components: constitutive norms, comparative categories, collective aspirations and cognitive references.

Constitutive norms: apswara

By constitutive norms I consider norms, values, traditions – to an extent all of these are included in the concept of *apswara*. *Apswara* is an unwritten moral code and respect of it is considered a sacred duty.¹¹⁶ In fact, Abkhaz identity is more

¹¹⁴ National self-image (Hirshberg 1993), national role conception (Holsti 1970), state (corporate, type, collective, and national) identity (Wendt 1994). Sometimes these are distinguished meticulously, but most often they are used interchangeably.

¹¹⁵ For the purposes of clarity, I make a distinction between Abkhazian and Abkhaz. I consider the first to be either 1) pertaining to the de facto state of Abkhazia or 2) pertaining to inhabitants of Abkhazia of Abkhaz, Russian, Armenian, Georgian or other ethnicity (I have not chosen the criterion of citizenship, because Gal/i Georgians are for the most part not allowed to become citizens) and the second is the ethnonym for Abkhaz people – an ethnic group living primarily in Abkhazia. Regardless, sometimes it is difficult to make a distinction as for instance Abkhazian culture is largely influenced by the Abkhaz culture.

¹¹⁶ *Apswara* (literally Abkhazness) can be defined as “the historically formed manifestation of national self-awareness and assertion of the Abkhaz; the unwritten code of popular knowledge and values, encompassing the system of customs and concepts of a person's spiritual and moral existence, the violation of which is ‘equivalent to death’” (Inal-ipa 1996, 21-22). It can also be defined as “the Abkhaz etiquette for personal behaviour, beliefs, values and language” (Kamkiia 2008). The closest equivalent to Western European frame of reference would be the manners of chivalry from the Middle Ages (Hewitt 1999, 247).

influenced by apswara than any religion, including Christianity or Islam.¹¹⁷ Apswara is a pre-modern cultural element in the Abkhaz national identity and depicts ideal forms of behaviour. Besides humility, honesty and hospitality, martial skills, heroism and bravery are deemed particularly desirable and bring honour, which is the main currency of apswara. Honour is both personal and collective - traditionally tied to the clan, the family, and the individual, with the elders being especially revered (Hewitt 1999, 245). Clans, although not nearly as important as they once were, are still the collective referent of honour.¹¹⁸

Apswara played the role of socialisation of the youth as well as the role of "transmitting knowledge in the absence of a written Abkhaz language" (Shesterinina 2014, 86). An ancient moral code, apswara partially managed to survive the Soviet era despite the regime's attempts to eradicate it as traditions like blood revenge, kidnapping brides and lavish weddings and funerals were considered harmful (Shesterinina 2014, 86-7). Since the fall of Soviet Union, Abkhazian culture has been influenced by neighbourly Russian culture through globalisation also Western culture. Nevertheless, apswara forms the kernel of Abkhazians' deep culture the intangible and invisible ideas, attitudes, feelings and beliefs that shape behaviour. Through state-building, apswara for the first time became part of state institutions and as "socialization into the basic intra-Abkhaz norms at the macro level did not commence until the 1990s, when the Abkhaz began building their post-war de facto state institutions" (Shesterinina 2014, 88). Preserving honour and practicing vengeance are still not only common but widely understood as a matter of individuals concerned. Disputes are settled by people

¹¹⁷ "In the Abkhaz case – both in the homeland and in the diaspora – religion has never developed into a significant identity marker to unite a large part of the Abkhaz community. The Abkhaz cultural and ethical code called "Apswara" is the main denominator of identification." (Smolnik & Weiss 2017, 18). The Abkhaz are mostly pagan and "the Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lak'oba, when asked recently about the religion of Abkhazia, answered that the Abkhaz are 80 per cent Christian, twenty percent (Sunni) Muslim, and 100 per cent pagan!" (Hewitt 1999, 205). Abkhazians' "two conversions to world religions, to Christianity in the sixth century and then to Islam under the Turks, have been less enduring than older ways of reverence for natural objects and for the dead." (*ibid.*).

¹¹⁸ "Clan solidarity is strongly developed in Abkhazian society. All persons bearing the same surname are considered relatives and to the best of their ability render help and support to one another, acting, when necessary, for the honour and interests of their representatives. Blood-feud might once have been the response to an insult – there was an example of this recorded as recently as the 1930s. An offender is no longer killed, but even today an Abkhazian will not tolerate an affront to his personal or familial dignity. Such cases are fraught with the danger of serious conflicts, into which the clans on both sides are usually drawn" (Hewitt 1999, 245).

in the affected lineage with vengeance widely tolerated and expected by the society. Those who settle disputes are “held in high esteem” (Costello 2015, 131) and honour, shame and relational obligation sometimes described as attributes of past society /.../ continue to this day” (Costello 2015, 118). The relevance of apswara in contemporary Abkhazia has been confirmed in present research and some interviewers explicitly acknowledged that apswara has had an effect on foreign policy. As stated by Abkhazia’s first Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sokrat Jinjolia:

"It is a part of the mentality of the people, the attitude to the word /.../ everything that has long been in the Caucasus and in Abkhazia in particular, has played a big role, honesty and loyalty to the word. If said – it means it is done. It does not need to be verified by any document, if you just say the word, it means it is bound to be carried out, it will be done. I do not want to say that now it is all the time like that, it is not, of course. But in foreign policy I have tried, at least for the period, which I can vouch for, to honestly carry out our foreign policy, if it can be called so" (interview with Sokrat Jinjolia¹¹⁹).

Comparative categories

Comparative categories as an element of national identity are images that emerge out of interaction between the (de facto) state and other actors. Here I examine how Abkhazia relates to its kin (in North Caucasus) and diaspora (predominantly in the middle East), its enemy/Other (Georgia), significant other (Russia) as well as the international community in general, and what bearing this has on its foreign policy. I need to point out that friendship, enmity, peace, alliance, and war are not permanent relationships or states of being.

Kin

The Abkhaz are a distinct people and have been recognised as such for at least seventy years, including "with a clearly accepted and maintained autonomy by

¹¹⁹ Sokrat Jinjolia is the former Speaker of the People’s Assembly, former Prime Minister, and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia (1992–1994).

the Soviet Union and then the Georgian SSR" (Green & Waters 2010, 40). According to Costello (2015, 11) the Abkhaz, compared to other post-Soviet states, are specific "in the great extent to which they have held onto the power of customary practices" that dominate the conduct of daily life. Indeed, Abkhaz culture can be described as traditional and conservative, with many pre-modern elements, from widespread paganism¹²⁰ to the importance of *apswara* – the above-discussed traditional customary law. Despite their uniqueness, the Abkhaz share many characteristics with the "mountain-peoples of the North Caucasus," in particular "their Circassian relatives (Kabardians, Adyghe, Cherkess)." (Hewitt 1999, 241). Geographical isolation prevented the emergence of a centralized political system but facilitated the establishment of a shared value system (Zürcher 2007, 13). Kabardians, Adyghe, Cherkess and even not closely related Chechens have played an important role in changing the course of the Georgian-Abkhaz war and contributed to the existence of Abkhazia. These relations have remained important but have suffered three blows. First, Abkhazians didn't reciprocate and didn't support Chechnya in its war against Russia. Second, most Circassians were excluded from the possibility of claiming Abkhazian citizenship.¹²¹ Third, in 2011 Circassian-Georgian relations were revived after Georgia recognised Circassian genocide, effectively weakening Circassian-Abkhazian relations. Furthermore, Abkhazia supported the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, which were opposed by the Circassians.¹²² I can conclude that although Abkhazians share many cultural traits with their kin (Circassians) and more distant North Caucasian people and although these ties were important in the past, their importance for national identity (which has become more narrowly

¹²⁰ "The Abkhazians are likely the only people of the Caucasus who continue to believe that a shaman may find out who caused a certain illness and the necessary remedy. There is a woman who is trusted with the knowledge of healing in almost every Abkhazian settlement" (Roudik 2008, 74).

¹²¹ "Problems between Abkhazia and the Circassians developed as a by-product of Abkhazian demographic policy. To resolve the country's demographic problems, the Abkhazian parliament passed a law allowing all people of ethnic Abkhazian origin to become citizens. /.../ Circassians had hoped that Abkhazia would allow the mass immigration of diaspora Circassians, descendants of those expelled from the Caucasus during the Russian conquest of the 19th century. However, Abkhazia made a preference for only some Circassian sub-ethnic groups, claiming that they belong to the same Abaza branch as the Abkhazians. The Abkhazian government included in this group: Abazins from Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Ubykhs from Turkey, and Shapsugs from the Krasnodar region, Turkey and Syria." (Zhemukov 2012).

¹²² Ibidem.

focused on Abkhaz ethnicity rather than on Circassian pan-ethnism) and foreign policy has waned. This is well illustrated by the fact that the largest mainstream Circassian umbrella organization KAFFED, the Federation of Caucasian Associations, which used to represent Abkhaz interests in Turkey, no longer does so and since 2010 most Abkhaz member associations left KAFFED and established the Federation of Abkhaz Associations (Abhaz-Fed) (Smolnik & Weiss 2017, 12–13).

Diaspora

Kin and diaspora sometimes overlap, such as in the case of Circassians in Turkey. This is logical if I consider the origins of this diaspora, which was religious expulsion that had little to do with (pan-)ethnicity. The origins of Abkhaz diaspora are the *mahajirs*, who were expelled from the country during and after the Russian conquest of the Caucasus in the late 19th century (discussed in Chapter 2). For a small nation, Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey and former Ottoman lands in the Middle East (larger than the population of Abkhazia itself) is significant and has played an important role in de-isolating Abkhazia, especially during the Russian-imposed CIS embargo of Abkhazia. In 1994-1995, a passenger ferry operated between Trabzon and Sukhum/i, which represented a lifeline for Abkhazia. It was, however, suspended by Turkey due to pressure from Georgia. In 1996 this pressure made Turkey enforce an embargo towards Abkhazia, which was defied by some businesspeople. Although the restrictions remain in place, trade between Turkey and Abkhazia takes place through cargo ships departing from Samsun, Bartın, and Trabzon and calling at Sochi or Novorossiisk (Smolnik et al. 2017, 6).

Georgia

Georgia is the other, against which Abkhazians identify themselves, but also the Other which is uncomfortably similar to the Self. Although Georgian-Abkhaz relation is now one of enmity, it was not always like this. Without getting into the historical intricacies of Georgian-Abkhazian relations, let us briefly consider five representations of Abkhazians by Georgian historians and politicians. These images are: Georgians, *guests*, *enemies*, *victims*, and *brothers*. They roughly

follow each other historically, but also exist at the same time, e.g. it is not uncommon to find among Georgians people who view Abkhazians as Georgians and those who view them as enemies or brothers.

The Georgian view of Abkhazians as enemies has developed quite late and is mostly limited to the period of the Georgian-Abkhaz war. Shortly before, Abkhazians were seen more as usurpers, manipulators, untrustworthy etc. Not long after the war, the image of Abkhazians as enemies has been softened in an attempt to stop the alienation and entice them back into considering staying part of Georgia. Georgian deputy Prime Minister Alexander Kavadze once stated with understanding and empathy, "that the Abkhaz, unlike Armenians, Greeks, and Azeris, 'have no other native land but Abkhazia', and that Georgia must hence 'do everything to ensure their rights" (Cornell 2002, 174). This recognition of Georgians as humans and as having suffered a lot during the war is also present in Abkhazia, especially among the older population and in the civil society organisations involved in second track diplomacy. However, it is not a common opinion among the young generations in Abkhazia and Georgia, which tend to be more radical, since they mostly have no direct contact of the other and no experience of coexistence.¹²³

This image of victim is sometimes extended to an image of a brotherly, but not necessarily friendly nation (not unlike how many Russians views Ukrainians). Souleimanov reports that "Georgians still tend to regard Abkhazians as a friendly, if not kindred, nationality. In an effort to excuse ethnic cleansing and murders, some Georgians tend to blame such groups as the North Caucasian volunteers, especially Chechens, who fought in large numbers in the war on the side of the Abkhazians, as well as Armenians and Russians, as the main culprits for the

¹²³ Sabirova (2008, 52–53) notes that young people in Abkhazia often perceive themselves as the victims of war Youth in Abkhazia "has a distinctive patriotic attitude characterised by a high degree of willingness to get involved in events that decide the fate of the country, including, if necessary, sacrificing their own lives." Another important takeaway from Sabirova's research is that according to her poll of residents of Abkhazia, apswara is very important to the Abkhaz and not important to non-Abkhaz. The Abkhaz believe preservation of the memory of the 1992-3 war to be the most important unifying factor (43.7%) along with apswara (43.7%), followed by living in the same territory (37.1%) and strong government (31.3%). Among all other ethnic groups, the picture is quite different. They see equality of all ethnic groups (49.7%), living on the same territory (36.9%) and the preservation of the memory of the 1992-3 war (32.5%) to be the most important unifying factors. Only 8% of non-Abkhaz considered apswara to be an important unifying factor.

violence against Georgians. Family relations are a truly important matter in the Caucasus, and this can also be seen as the basis of the Georgian integrative view of Abkhazians" (Souleimanov 2013, 118). The family metaphor puts emphasis on kinship ties and mistrust of foreigners. This narrative is surprisingly common in the Caucasus and conflicts between small nations are often seen by them as stirred and fuelled by the intervening big powers for their own interests. Translated into Abkhazian foreign policy: Georgia is the obvious enemy, but we also have to be careful and wary about the intentions of our friend – Russia.

Russia

Without getting into the details of the Russian-Abkhaz relationship – which will be the main focus of Chapter 5 – let us briefly consider the role of Russian in Abkhazian national identity and how this is relevant for Abkhazia's foreign policy.

As Morin & Paquin (2018, 263) have noted: “national identity is not exclusively created by contrasts. Alliances can also contribute to constructing identity.” On the surface, things are clear: Russia is Abkhazia's patron, protector, an ally and a friend. The only significant country to have recognised Abkhazia, offered Russian passports along with social transfers and possibility of travel, provided security, investments and aid. However, just like with Georgian-Abkhazian relations, which are often simplified into enmity, Russian-Abkhaz relations have and still do extend beyond simple friendship.

First, let us stress what scholars still keep getting wrong – that Russia was not a patron of Abkhazia from the outset.¹²⁴ Despite that, more linkages exist between Abkhazia and Russia than mere political, economic and security cooperation. There are social and cultural linkages, but these are not without frictions. One of the most important social linkages are the many Russian tourists who come to

¹²⁴ As has already been suggested in Chapter 2, Russian-Abkhaz relations fluctuated widely over time. Russians have switched sides – from supporting Georgia to supporting Abkhazia – relatively late, in early 2000 (George 2009, 132; Coppieters 2018, 995; Derlugian 1998, 285). This fact is also often pointed out by Abkhazian policy makers, when the topic of Russian-Abkhazian relations and especially Abkhazian dependence on Russia, is discussed: “for some reason no-one remembers that we had a very difficult relationship with Russia, for 10 years we were in the blockade. The blockade was reflected in our people /.../ Only male adult population over 55 years had the right to cross the border with Russia. Women in Abkhazia carried on their shoulders the whole load: country, economy.” (Interview with Gennady Gagulya).

vacation in Abkhazia: “Russian tourists benefit from a visa-free travel regime with Abkhazia, which has retained some of its attraction as a holiday destination since the Soviet years” (Gerrits & Bader 2016, 304). Although Russian tourists are a welcome source of revenue for locals and being a tourist destination is a source of past pride and present optimism about the future (Sideri 2012, 271), Russians are often viewed as arrogant and disrespectful of (more conservative) local culture and custom and Sukhum/i’s City Council has banned swimwear outside the beach areas, while “signs essentially saying no naked Russians allowed are being placed around the city” (Lomsadze 2014). In the summer of 2017, a further series of events undermined this social linkage: in August an ammunition dump exploded, killing two Russian tourists and wounding 64. The news caused fears among Russians and resulted in a wave of cancellations. Three weeks before, a local man attacked a Russian tourist group and killed one person (Kucera 2017). In the summer of 2018, hundreds of Russians ended up on the street having been sold tours by fake internet sites offering trips to Abkhazia, further impacting the feeling of insecurity among visiting Russians (Khashig 2011).

One of the biggest sources of tension between Abkhazia and Russia that have remained to this day is the “tension over the law that would allow Russians to buy property (houses) in Abkhazia”, while others include: border demarcation issues,¹²⁵ conflicts between the Russian and Abkhazian Orthodox Churches (the former tried to take over the Novoafonsky [New Athos] monastery, and the conflict over the ownership of 'MVO Sukhum', Abkhazia's biggest sanatorium. (Khashig 2011). Despite viewing Russians as friends, Abkhazians are weary of Russia. They know allegiances can shift (as they already have several times) and Cooley and Mitchell (2010, 80) go as far as stating: “Ironically, Abkhazia believes that a warming of relations between Georgia and Russia is a more significant threat than invading Georgian troops.” Khashig (2010) also recognises that regulating relations with Russia represents a problem for the Abkhaz political elite. Dependence was a concern already in 2010, when Cooley and Mitchell wrote their overview of what ties Abkhazia to Russia (Cooley and Mitchell 2010, 77), focusing on Russian presence in media, security, and politics but also such

¹²⁵ Abkhazians accuse Russia of taking the village of Aibga and another 160 sq.km. of Abkhazian territory (*ibid.*).

practical matters as the use of Russian passports, currency and replacement of local phone exchanges with Russian ones. Since then Abkhazia has become even more dependent and fear of overdependence is expressed by representatives of civil society and advisors (Interview with Natella Akaba¹²⁶), although foreign policy actors were careful to qualify it in the interviews (Interviews with Viacheslav Chirikba¹²⁷, Maxim Gvinjia¹²⁸, and Sokrat Jinjolia).

Minorities in Abkhazia

Abkhazians have three main fears. I have already discussed two: the fear of being attacked and swallowed up by Georgia and the fear of being turned into a protectorate by Russia. The third fear is that of being overshadowed in their own republic by the minorities. I discuss these from an ontological security perspective in Chapter 7.

This demographic situation is not favourable to the Abkhaz as they at best make half of the population (50.7 per cent according to the 2011 census), with Georgians amounting to just under 20 per cent, Armenians approximately 17 per cent, and Russians just shy of 10 per cent (Dembinska 2018, 8–9). Souleimanov (2013, 128) attributes the "unfavourable ethnodemographic composition" to the expulsion of the mahajirs in 1864 and subsequent settlement of immigrants from different parts of the Russian Empire (covered in Chapter 2), including many Georgians (although there is evidence of Mingrelian presence going back centuries). This migration was probably a result of circumstances, although Abkhazians tend to see it as an organized invasion. What, however, amounted to an organized invasion, was Beria's¹²⁹ resettlement programme during which the Abkhaz becoming a minority in the republic and were discriminated against

¹²⁶ Natella Akaba was the Head of the Public Chamber of Abkhazia when this interview was conducted.

¹²⁷ Viacheslav Chirikba was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia when this interview was conducted.

¹²⁸ Maxim Gvinjia is the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia (2010–2011).

¹²⁹ Lavrentiy Beria was, like Stalin, a Georgian, but a Mingrelian born in Abkhazia. After making his career in the secret police as Stalin's right hand, in 1936 he ordered the poisoning of Nestor Lakoba, Abkhazia's most popular political leader (King 2008, 192–193), who has saved Abkhazia from collectivisation (Marshall 2010, 239). In 1940s, Beria enforced a resettlement that changed the demographics in the region and made the Abkhaz a minority in their own titular republic (Dembinska 2018, 8).

by the Georgian elite especially through the restrictions on the use of the Abkhaz language (Dembinska 2018, 8). By the 1980s, when Soviet Union was approaching its end, Georgians were in a relative although not an absolute majority in the republic.¹³⁰ Although in historical retrospect, it is clear that Abkhazians have managed to significantly alter the demographics of the de facto state (mostly through expelling Georgians during the Georgian-Abkhaz war), Abkhazia has remained heterogenous and this resulted in “ambiguous politics that simultaneously exclude and include others. On the one hand, the objective is to reverse the position and status of the ethnic Abkhaz on ‘their own’ territory in order to justify the independence of Abkhazia. On the other hand, ‘it is critical to attract other minorities into the project.” (Dembinska 2018, 8–9). Abkhazians have tried to establish an ethnocracy based on precarious practices of simultaneous social inclusion (for the purpose of legitimacy) and political exclusion, while also professing reservedness about in-migration from other parts of the world – Russia (ban on property sales), China (Lambert 2018), and Central Asia in spite of the fact that since 1989 the population has more than halved (Cooley and Mitchell 2010, 74), much of Abkhazia lays empty and lacks human capital to develop (Cooley and Mitchell 2010, 76).

Although several minorities inhabited Abkhazia in the past, some of them are no longer present or present in very small numbers: Svans, Abazins, Ubykhs, Greeks, and Estonians. Significant minorities that remain are Mingrelians (Gal/i Georgians), Russians, and Armenians which together account for half or more of the population. While Gal/i Georgians are Mingrelians, not Kartvelians (like the majority of Georgians), they are viewed with mistrust at best and are politically discriminated. President Alexander Ankvab was ousted from power for wishing to give Gal/i Georgians Abkhazian citizenship and hence being too soft on the population widely seen as hostile (Delcour & Wolczuk 2015, 470–471; Hale 2014, 352–353). I have discussed Abkhazian wariness of Russia and opposition to

¹³⁰ "Georgians comprised 45.7% of the population of Abkhazia, whereas the Abkhaz constituted 17.8%, the ratio that was reverted after the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-1993 /.../ Georgians were a dominant group across most of the territory of Abkhazia then. The Gal/i region was almost entirely Georgian. The major cities of Abkhazia—Sukhum/i and Ochamchire/a—as well had a dominant Georgian population. The exceptions included the region of Gudauta, a traditional Abkhaz enclave, and a mountainous mining region of Tqvarchel/i" (Shesterinina 2014, 97).

Russians buying property in Abkhazia earlier. However, there is little fear attached to the Russian minority in Abkhazia since it is composed mostly of pensioners, who – together with Gal/i Georgians – surprisingly prefer Abkhazia to be independent to it becoming part of Russia or Georgia (this view is economically logical considering Russian pensioners receive Russian pensions and live in Abkhazia,¹³¹ where expenses are much lower, so they have a reason to support the status quo). Although Russians in Abkhazia are not seen as a threat, “increased russification is a challenge to Abkhaz identity and it remains unclear whether Abkhazia will be able to preserve an Abkhaz national identity in an independent state” (Kerselidze 2015, 315-6). Similarly, Armenians are seen as well integrated in the Abkhazian society and are in good moral standing as they largely supported the Abkhaz during the Georgian-Abkhaz war, even forming the Armenian Bagramian battalion to fight on the side of the Abkhaz (Cornell 2001, 174).

Finally, it should be emphasized that there are relations between the relationships I outlined and that one affects the others. For instance, the “close military and economic cooperation between Moscow and Abkhazia casts an aura of patron–client dependence that delegitimizes the Abkhaz independence struggle in the eyes of the international community” (Florea 2017, 341). Greater engagement between Abkhazia and the West could worsen these ties as could the improvement in Georgian-Russian relations. A dip in Russian-Turkish relations following the downing of the Russian jet in 2016, has put Abkhazia in a difficult spot as it felt obliged to support Russia and join the Russian economic sanctions against Turkey, although hesitantly, with exceptions and questionable implementation.

International community

The final element of interaction, shaping the construction of Abkhazian national identity is less of an actor and more an environment holding the mirror to the state-building aspirations of Abkhazia. Often identity construction vis-a-vis the

¹³¹ Not only Russians, but the majority of adult Abkhazians (except for Mingrelians/Georgians in Gal/i), have Russian citizenship. If during the Soviet period, they worked for at least five years, they have the right to a Russian state pension (Kolossoff & O'Loughlin 2011, 638).

international community is shaped not by interaction, but lack of it – through isolation. Or as Fabry (2017, 23) put it: “refusals of state recognition have, in general, a far stronger affirmative impact on national identity than extensions of it.” A formed identity is not just a precondition for self-determination and joining international organisations. Morin & Paquin (2018, 263) observe that it “is a way of consecrating aspirations of national identity” as has been the case with East European countries joining the EU and NATO, for example. Since being recognised by the international community is even more fundamental than becoming a member of an international organisation, it can be concluded that it is of extreme importance for national identity. A distinction must be made between non-recognition and non-engagement, and between physical and ontological security. Although non-engagement presents no physical threat it threatens ontological security of the state. Just like an isolated person without a possibility to interact with other people, the state turns inwards and starts questioning its identity (this is one of the findings I discuss further in Chapter 7).

The role – and to an extent the identity – of de facto state is imposed (like the role of a rogue state), even if the latter does not accept it (Breuning 2011, 33). It is a non-existent or at best a passive role in the international community - Abkhazia is a part that plays no part: “some political subjects are unrecognised because they are perceived as parts but that have no part in a certain community.” (Biswas & Nair 2010, 123). It is an object to be engaged with, not a subject that engages. This isolation has significant consequences for the ontological security of Abkhazia as ontological security is “formed and sustained through relationships” (Mitzen 2006, 342). This suggests that when routinized interaction is present, attachment happens, which can help explain Abkhazian dependence on Russia beyond political recognition, economic aid and security guarantees. Even more significantly, when this routinized interaction is absent, attachment to international norms is absent, too.

The only way out of the situation of non-recognition is for Abkhazia to convince the international community that it is worthy of recognition and that recognition is

in the interest of the recognizing states.¹³² International community figures as a spectator and a judge that is able to both change the status of Abkhazia and to apply or remove the stigma of non-recognition, which enables or disables engagement with the de facto state.

Collective aspirations

Collective aspirations of Abkhazia are twofold: they concern the status (aspiration to recognition) and to interacting with the rest of the world (aspiration to engagement).

Collective anxieties and inspirations of states share with individual anxieties and inspirations of their citizens the same cultural context. Therefore, if on the individual level isolation is widely understood as a social sanction that follows a breach of a social norm and entails loss of honour, it is likely that it is interpreted similarly by all individuals who share this culture – including those individuals in the positions of power who lead and represent the state. As will be discussed in this chapter and in Chapter 7, non-engagement and isolation are seen in Abkhazia as a punishment for transgressing an international norm of territorial integrity, which is consistent with expulsion and social isolation of individuals in pre-modern societies (or societies with acting pre-modern rules, such as *apswara*) who have broken a norm. The norm that was allegedly violated by Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which, in turn, claim to accept that norm and to not have transgressed it, has often been discursively invoked as that of territorial integrity (Broers 2014).

If territorial integrity is the norm that was broken, non-recognition is a stigma and non-engagement is a shame. Drawing on recently emerged research on culture, identity and stigma in Abkhazia (Shesterinina 2014, Costello 2015, Pacher 2017, and Ker-Lindsay 2018), I first proceed to define stigma in relation to honour, then

¹³² This briefly seemed like a possibility when Kosovo's recognition was being discussed by some of the major world powers and shortly after it was eventually recognized. However, the path of the 'earned recognition' or the 'standards before status' model soon proved futile as Kosovo's recognizers refused to consider that it could be counted as a precedent for other states seeking recognition. Until the bias towards territorial integrity and against nations' right to self-determination through secession changes, Abkhazia will not be able to convince the majority of the international community that its recognition is their interest.

examine shame and differentiate it from guilt. The contribution I make is then to link isolation and the associated guilt on the level of the individual and on the level of the state, the link being the culture of honour the two share.¹³³

Stigma and identity

As evidenced in Chapter 2, the idea of the Abkhaz as a guilty nation is not new.¹³⁴ The current stigma “suggests that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are ‘illegal’ or ‘abnormal’ or even ‘criminal’ and ‘dangerous’ entities” (Pacher 2017, 6). Stigmas are different from stereotypes in that they play a corrective function and prescribe behaviour: “the stigma’s aim in international relations is to push the isolated countries back toward norm-compliance” (Pacher 2017, 8). Stigma can, however, be supported by “stereotypes that view them as puppet states or harbours of criminal activities and smuggling” (Pacher 2017, 8). If stigma is justified and guilt is accepted, the state – just like an individual – accepts the punishment of exclusion and isolation. If, however, stigma is viewed as not justified and guilt rejected, the state will not accept isolation but will try to interact with others and convince them that the stigma is unjustified and unfair. Ker-Lindsay (2018, 1) recognises the relationship between stigma and non-engagement as “the stigmatisation of individual *de facto* states can change over time and

¹³³ As Costello (2015, 16) writes “The term *itsasym* is used to denote shame in the sense of being the result of anything that generates a sense of shame, including one’s own inappropriate conduct and the behaviour of someone else, and is contrary to *apswara*.” [The emphasis is mine] As can be seen, individual’s guilt is not the only source of shame as the loss of honour can be collective.

¹³⁴ I have partly discussed this in Chapter 2 and here I only briefly summarize the relevant points. After the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878, the Abkhaz were considered as a “guilty” nation which collaborated with the Ottoman Empire (Bgazhba and Lakoba, 2007, 236–240). Mass deportations of the Abkhaz, known as *mahajirism*, were carried out in retribution (Dzidzarija, 1982) and the ‘guilt’ was only removed in 1907 as the weakened Abkhaz in general did not participate in the 1905 anti-tsarist Revolution” (Shesterinina 2014, 92). Guilt only induces shame when it is recognised, not when it is imposed from the outside, but it always produces a stigma. Stigma continued throughout the Soviet period. Although Abkhazians, unlike some other North Caucasian peoples (Balkars, Chechens, Ingush), were spared population transfers of 1930s and 1940s, they were seen as suspect by the leadership of SSR Georgia as well as the leadership of USSR (which was for a quarter of a century heavily Georgian with Stalin, Beria and Ordzonikidze calling the shots). Abkhazians didn’t collaborate with Germans and were not considered a guilty nation, were not deported, but were nevertheless marginalized within the republic through the settling of Georgians, Russians and other ethnicities in Abkhazia (Nodia 1997; Souleimanov 2013; Shesterinina 2014; Dembinska 2018). The promotion of Abkhazians to prominent political posts in the republic as a form of positive discrimination of the Soviet regime in 1970s and 1980s probably did more harm than good by further stigmatizing them as meritless usurpers who have climbed to the top. If in the Tsarist times, the Abkhazians violated the norm of loyalty, they proved all too loyal – and rewarded for their loyalty by the central government – as the Soviet Union approached its end.

circumstance, and with it the degree of engagement without recognition enjoyed by that de facto state can vary.” To sum up: engagement is a way of countering the stigma of non-recognition, of battling an imposed identity. Through engagement the imposed identity of stigma is rejected, and a de facto state's self-identity is affirmed, preserving its ontological security.

The discourse that underpins engagement and the arguments that a de facto state puts forward to convince the international community of the injustice of stigma, are different. The foreign policy strategies can resort to victimisation and claim remedial recognition or highlight institution-building and democratisation and claim it earned recognition. In any case, the narrative it tells, has an impact on the state's identity: “The stories states tell about themselves are not “just stories”—they have concrete behavioural consequences. Identities are both told and enacted.” (Mälksoo 2018, 8). This is especially true of de facto states, where domestic and international affairs are closely intertwined.

Shame and (self-)isolation

As Pacher (2017, 8) notes, that stigmatisation is based on an insufficient understanding and vagueness of shared norms that are interpreted differently by different actors: “Not common values, but the quest for the international society's ontological security leads to stigmatization.” Abkhazians feel no guilt for breaching the international norm of territorial integrity – they refer to the international norm of peoples' right to self-determination and interpret their independence war as one of self-defence and for the preservation of themselves as a people. They are however ashamed of their unrecognised status and insulted by non-engagement of others. As Costello (2015,152) has noted in his ethnographic study of Abkhazian society, shame “appears very differently from guilt”¹³⁵ Shame is “felt when being placed outside of society and that had to be

¹³⁵ Voell & Kaliszewska (2015) give this real example, which illustrates the importance in the Abkhazian society of apswara and the preservation of honour: “A villager had killed a fellow villager in an automobile accident. The Soviet court convicted the driver of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced him to a prison term. Relatives of the deceased, believing that they needed to take their own action in accordance with traditions of blood revenge, appeared to be preparing some retaliatory action against a member of the convicted man's family. The elders who told me this story said they did not really think a retaliatory murder was imminent, but that talk about taking action was the family's way of showing its high value of Abkhazian traditions, a mark of honour in any Abkhazian community, then and now.”

ended through taking individual action to restore one's position or, if not, in exiling oneself or even committing suicide" (Costello 2015, 152). Whereas stigma imposes isolation, shame can result in self-isolation. This applies not only to individuals, but also to de facto states.

Abkhazians traditionally experienced shame "as individuals, virtually in isolation, in the sense of being made to feel isolated from life" (Costello 2015, 151). While honour is lost, and stigma imposed collectively, shame is experienced individually. If the identity of being largely unrecognised de facto state is accepted, it can lead to fatalism (coming close to the term 'learned helplessness' in cognitive psychology) and act as self-fulfilling prophecy. One form that has consistently come up in the interviews with decision-makers in Abkhazia is that of the 'sour grapes'. Officials would normally confirm that obtaining (wider) international recognition remains a high foreign policy priority, but then often state that "recognition does not really matter", is "not that important", that they "will not beg for it", and that "it is enough to have recognised ourselves, and that we were recognised by Russia" (Interview with Viacheslav Chirikba). To return to collective aspirations of Abkhazia, those of recognition and engagement: it seems that a gradual shift in priorities has taken place and that Abkhazia has moved from the long-term goal of obtaining recognition to adopting a more pragmatic, short- and medium-term goals of attracting investment, aid, forging informal cultural links. How can this be explained?

There is little research on how lack or recognition and engagement affects the mindsets of foreign policy decision-makers in de facto states. Fabry's (2017, 23) research does point out that "refusals of state recognition have, in general, a far stronger affirmative impact on national identity than extensions of it." This may help to explain the resilience and longevity of de facto states, whose motivation to persist in the legal limbo of non-recognition is strengthened by non-recognition itself. However, existing ethnographic research on Abkhazian cultural patterns (Hewitt 1999; Shesterinina 2014; Voell & Kalisyewska 2015; Costello 2015; Smolnik et al. 2017) and this author's own interviews with Abkhazian decision-makers, suggest that lack of recognition can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy and represent an additional constraint to de facto state's foreign policy. Inversely,

recognitions can boost a state's self-confidence, infuse its foreign policy with dynamism and enable it to take up a more pro-active stance. This seems to be at odds with previously quoted statement by Fabry (2017, 23) that “refusals of state recognition have, in general, a far stronger affirmative impact on national identity than extensions of it.” As will be demonstrated (in Chapter 6 with reference to the EU and the US and in Chapter 7 more broadly), several factors shape how decision-makers interpret non-recognition and non-engagement, what meaning and significance they attach to it. We have already discussed how relations with other actors (kin, diaspora enemy, friend, spectator/judge) can affect identity and shape foreign policy. In this segment, we have analysed how cultural factors shape perceptions and behaviour, and since this represents a lacuna of research on de facto states, I examine it further in this chapter. I now discuss the third factor that shapes national identity and influences foreign policy - cognitive references produced and reproduced through media narratives and images, maps and other cartographic representations, and state trappings and symbols.

Cognitive references

As has been stated, identity is relational – it is constructed through relations with others, but also through the relationship with the self. Self-identity and its preservation in time-space (ontological security) depends on maintaining a socially constructed image, which is done through media discourse and other forms of representation. It is well-established in de facto states literature that “cartographic representations, national maps and other symbols of nationhood play an integral part of building national identity and legitimacy” (Kabachnik 2012, 403). We focus on three discourses – the triple-M of media, maps, and modeling and mimicry. Media discourse promotes the image of Abkhazia in the present. Maps provide historical, geographical and demographical legitimization. Modeling and mimicry are conveyed through trappings and symbols of state to present Abkhazia as a state with all its attributes. All three discourses intend to de-stigmatize and normalize Abkhazia and present it as a normal state.

The media

On the one hand, media in Abkhazia is largely state-controlled and pro-Russian. On the other hand, there are some independent media outlets that as part of the civil society are important in sustaining a sense of independent identity. I explain the relationship between the above statements through a brief analysis of the media landscape below.

Firstly, “the mass media in Abkhazia is subsidized by the state, allowing the latter to control this sector. The news agency “*Apsnypress*”, newspapers “*Respublika Abkhazia*” and “*Apsni*” are controlled by the state with editors being appointed by the ruling class” (Mikhelidze and Pirozzi 2008, 28). The state media is dominated by pro-Russian views, mostly because it benefits from Russian funding and are thus of higher quality. Independent media in Abkhazia is generally of poorer quality due to the lack of funding: “Most of the budget money for the media is spent on the TV. This year for the first time it was provided in the budget to allocate cost to the independent media, that is, a very small amount from the budget” (Interview with Manana Gurgulya¹³⁶).

Secondly, Ó Beacháin (2012, 173) and Cooley and Mitchell (2010, 61) state that relative to the size of Abkhazia, there is quite a bit of media diversity with several independent news outlets. Among the independent media outlets, the newspaper *Chegemskaya Pravda*, *Radio Soma*, and *Studio Re* TV-Programmes have been notable in sharing views that differed from the pro-Russian state media (Mikhelidze and Pirozzi 2008, 28). Hoch et al. (2016, 6) add *Echo of Abkhazia* and *Abkhazian Forum*, but note that these outlets have been “more or less connected with a few prominent independent-minded journalists, such as Vitaly Sharev or Manana Gurgulia, rather than being newspapers of an independent character overall.”

Despite the lack of funding and poorer quality of independent media, which results in in small readership and weak influence of the independent media, these outlets have played an important role in Abkhazian civil society development,

¹³⁶ Manana Gurgulya was the former Head of Apsnypress when this interview was conducted.

especially in supporting the 2004 protests (Kopeček et al. 2016, 94). As Cooley and Mitchell (2010, 66) note, Abkhaz media commentators are critical of the “leadership’s transfer of key strategic assets to Russia.” The independent media also produces critical stories about domestic corruption and governance problems while at the same time facing “severe pressure from the leadership in Sukhumi” (Cooley and Mitchell 2010, 69). The media landscape in Abkhazia is therefore characterised by a degree of diversity and pluralism but the pro-Russian state media is dominant.

Media is the main vehicle for public diplomacy, conceptualized by McConnell et al. (2012, 805) conceptualise it as a relationship between the government, the media, and public opinion. However, given its status, size, and resources, Abkhazia is in no position to set media discourse and shape the opinions of foreign audiences. Its media is therefore aimed not externally but at the domestic population. As such, the media does play an important role as a link between the foreign policy and the domestic politics of Abkhazia, acting as a filter to public perceptions of Abkhaz foreign policy. When it comes to state media, several interview respondents have assessed relations between the MFA and the media as very good (Interview with Manana Gurgulya; interview with Viacheslav Chirikba). Political representatives in cooperation with state and Russian media mostly try to react and counter the discourse of the international media.¹³⁷ Hoch et al. (2016, 10) state that due to the influence of domestic media, “Abkhazian society remains locked into stereotypical views of Georgia as a belligerent opponent—a stereotype”, however they also note that “in the opinion of many Abkhazians, the conflict has been resolved /.../ That is why Abkhazia’s civil society is currently focusing its efforts on domestic issues such as administrative

¹³⁷ as stated by Gennady Gagulya: “we represent our country and try to tell people who we are, why we are, because the information that is spread throughout the media is far different from the truth” (Interview with Gennady Gagulya). The negative image of Abkhazia reproduced by the western media is so strong that according to Arthur Gagulya, who is in charge of the EU, the US and Canada sector at the Abkhazian MFA, there have been occasions when the European and US officials, ambassadors came here; even despite their actual presence here, despite what they saw with their own eyes, there were times that they processed information in their own way” (Interview with Arthur Gagulya). Western media discourse is not favourable to Abkhazia and as Kabachnik (2012, 399) has remarked: “Based on the persistent political rhetoric typical of the media coverage of the conflict, it would be easy to believe that Abkhazia separated from Georgia in 2008. However, Abkhazia has been independent of Tbilisi since 1993.”

reform, media legislation, reform of the judicial system, and copyright protection” (Hoch et al. 2016, 7).

However complex and internally conflicted the media landscape in Abkhazia, the media remain an important part of cognitive references in Abkhazia by 1) countering foreign media discourse and de-stigmatizing Abkhazia; 2) perpetuating the sense of a Georgian threat; and 3) promoting positive views of Russia. The independent media represent a limited but non-negligible challenge by questioning and problematizing 2) and 3) and as such play an important role in sustaining the self-identity of Abkhazia as an independent state.

Maps

With maps, just like in the media, the odds are stacked against Abkhazia: “Most maps of the world continue to represent them [Abkhazia and South Ossetia] as parts of Georgia” (Artman 2013, 696). Just like it cannot influence the mainstream media discourse, Abkhazia has no influence over the mainstream cartographic discourse. Kabachnik (2012), drawing on Krishna (1994) writes of cartographic anxieties of Abkhazia as a fear for both physical and ontological security.¹³⁸ The way to deal with cartographic anxieties is first to extend sovereignty to all claimed territory and be incorporated into the state. Abkhazia has largely achieved that in the Georgian-Abkhaz war in 1990s and finished it in the August war of 2008 when they expelled the Georgians and as of then fully control the territory they lay claim on (Kabachnik 2012, 403). Second, these ‘gains’ need to be visually represented, mapped as “cartographic representations, national maps and other symbols of nationhood play an integral part of building national identity and legitimacy” (Kabachnik 2012, 403). However, some areas, such as Gal/i and Kodori Gorge present challenges for cartographers as the Abkhaz have only recently taken control over these regions and hence the whole territory they lay claim on (Kabachnik 2012, 410). This is because these are predominantly Georgian areas with Georgian population and Georgian names – to map them in accordance with

¹³⁸ “The recent proliferation of Abkhazian national maps reveals the attention given to Abkhazia’s ‘shape’. To legitimize the national map, Abkhazia must claim control over the entire territory within Abkhazia’s borders. Attempts at the nationalization of all Abkhazian space have encountered difficulties in two problematic regions, the Gal/i district and Kodori Gorge” (Kabachnik 2012, 397).

national aspirations would require the erasure of this population with all traces of its existence. As this is unacceptable, a compromise solution seems to be to withhold Abkhazian citizenship to Gal/i Georgians and to change place names from Georgian to Abkhazian. Whether these were originally Abkhazian and later subject to Georgisation as some have suggested (interview with Sokrat Jinjolia) or Georgian, is another question.

Like countering the media discourse, production of alternative maps which depict Abkhazia as an independent, internationally recognised state, is not as much aimed at foreign, as at domestic audience. As Abkhazia's status does not enable it to have a voice in international fora, be represented abroad through recognised embassies, or reach foreign audiences through mass media, virtual representations have become an important alternative channel: embassy websites, media articles, blog posts, social networks and discussion forums offer platforms for virtual representations of Abkhazia in virtual space and "help to construct Abkhazia as a national state" while building "support for alternative political geographic representations of the world." (Kabachnik 2012, 405).

Normality through modelling and mimicry

Finally, the last of the discourses underpinning the Abkhazian national identity and the idea of Abkhazia as a normal state, a regular member of the international community, is based on modeling and mimicry of the trappings of state, which are important for nation-building and state-building (in an ethnocracy these are hard to disentangle). By modeling I mean the conscious borrowing and adoption of foreign models and practices of state institution and by mimicry the signalling of trappings of state in the conditions of absent state-building. Drawing on Bhabha's (1984, 126) definition of mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" in the post-colonial context, McConnell et al. (2012, 806) argue that "the diplomacy of state-like non-state actors can be understood as mimicry of a colonial (and colonizing) discourse of legitimacy; the mimicry can approach its referent asymptotically but never match it, never gaining full recognition as equal" (McConnell et al., 806). There is no colonial discourse of legitimacy today, but

there certainly is a discourse in which recognised liberal democracies are considered the norm.

Trappings of state include legal documents, such as the Constitution; political institutions, such as an elected parliament and the presidency (Costello 2015, 17–18). Furthermore, Abkhazia – like other de facto states – has “a separate government with functional ministries, separate health and education institutions” (Florea 2017, 341). Unsurprisingly, Russia is most often taken as the model for laws, institutions and practices of the Abkhazian state (Mylonas & Ahram 2015, 2). Trappings of statehood also include symbols: the national flag and anthem, coat of arms.¹³⁹

Broers (2013, 59) states that “de facto states present an existential paradox in their simultaneously transgressive and mimetic qualities: they both challenge the international state order by violating de jure borders and replicate it by seeking to exhibit the normal appearance of a state.” However, there is no paradox there: the de facto states, excluded from the club of recognised states and stigmatized as renegades, have no choice but to model and mimic what they believe is normal and widely-accepted behavior. They believe that if they are like the other states, the international community will be obliged to extend recognition to them, or as Pacher (2017, 12) puts it: “A contested polity is ‘externally acceptable’ if it has sufficiently internalized the usual foreign policy methods so that its membership would simply serve as an extension of currently routinized practices. Norm-compliance of a stigmatized polity simply means that the actor behaves like ‘one of us.’” Russo (2018, 7) acknowledges mimicking in foreign policy (although he calls it para-diplomacy): “The governments of these de facto states are involved in “para-diplomatic activities”, dispatching representatives abroad and trying to develop their status in the international context by means of collective legitimation.” Indeed, mimicking in foreign policy and specifically in diplomacy has a double role: it promotes its statehood through diplomacy, but even more

¹³⁹ Abkhazian flag itself is an interesting symbol: “the green and white stripes represent harmony between Islam and Christianity. The white hand of friendship represents Abkhazia on 13th century Genoese maps, while the seven white stars on the red background are the seven historical divisions of Abkhazia” (Hewitt 1999, 21). The flag depicts a peaceful country of religious harmony and coexistence, a welcoming place of friendship with a long and rich history. Each of these symbols is another element that supports the call for recognition.

importantly - it provides the proof for it by exhibiting the capacity to engage in diplomacy. It truly is, as the Olympic slogan goes, more important to take part than to win.

Modelling and mimicry are ways of sustaining the sense of normality and as such aimed at both foreign and domestic audiences. They can also be considered part of Abkhazia's arsenal of foreign policy tactics – a topic I examine in the next section.

Foreign policy objectives, strategies and tactics

Recognition has always been a declared objective and the first priority of Abkhazia. However, it seems that with no recognitions forthcoming (with the exception of the recognition by Syria in 2018), working on short-term goals of forging economic and cultural links has been just as important (Frear 2014, 86). I explore the objectives, strategies and tactics of Abkhaz foreign policy below.

Objectives and strategies

Some opinions in policy circles whether recognition is still the first goal seem to consider engagement as more important than recognition. Some members of elites in Abkhazia believe that recognition is “maybe a dream, but not a goal” (Interview with Natella Akaba), while for others engagement “is even more important than anything else /.../ to become independent and be economically dependent that does not mean to have independence, it is something else. It is an imitation of independence.” The relatively unrealistic goals of obtaining recognition from a large part of the international community with a necessity to increase internal legitimacy through good governance have led to a pragmatic search for diverse ways of interaction with different actors, the most prominent being the multi-vector foreign policy, most often employed with reference to engagement with the EU and the US (further discussed in Chapter 6).

Multi-vector foreign policy

'Multi-vector foreign policy' is a term that is most closely associated with post-Soviet states that have not adopted straightforward pro-EU or pro-Russian foreign policy. According to Gnedina (2015, 1008), "the post-Soviet leaders claim that it is a policy of cooperation and co-habitation with all regional powers. Others however, view 'multivector' foreign policy as 'shifting, incoherent, and ideologically vacuous' behaviour." Minasyan (2012, 268–269) considers the Baltic states, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova as examples of pro-Western univectoral foreign policy, while pro-Russian univectoral foreign policy now prevails in the de-facto states Abkhazia, North Ossetia, and Transnistria, but not in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Minasyan, multi-vector foreign policy is the prevailing approach in Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states.

Multi-vector foreign policy,¹⁴⁰ most closely associated with president Baghapsh, was about diversification of Abkhazia's foreign policy (Berg & Vits 2018, 14). While Abkhazia now has a univectoral pro-Russian foreign policy, it did explicitly attempt to introduce (a more) multi vectoral foreign policy under the presidency of Baghapsh. He understood the multi-vector foreign policy to be "free from ideological prejudices and opportunistic short-term considerations" (Berg and Vits 2018, 10). Practically, this meant counterbalancing the heavy domination of the patron state (Berg and Vits 2018, 9). This counterbalancing was however very careful not to go against Russian strategic interests, resulting in the Russian MFA expressing support for Abkhazia's multi-vector foreign policy (Berg and Vits 2018, 10). Despite the fact that Abkhazia never had a truly multi-vector foreign policy, "in comparison with other cases, Abkhazia is closest to what could be perceived as policy diversification" (Berg and Vits 2018, 14).

Foreign policy diversification has mostly been considered in terms of actors with which Abkhazia is willing to have relations with, but not about the kind quality of these relations. What is crucial here is that expanding the circle of interaction in the context of wide-spread non-recognition is not possible without considering relations other than those of mutual diplomatic recognition. This is further

¹⁴⁰ Multi-vector foreign policy appeared in Abkhazia around 2010 with the aim of creating good relations with both Russia (which has recognised Abkhazia in 2008) and the West, which rejected the possibility of recognition, but was open to engagement." (Kopeček et al. 2016, 96).

corroborated by the fact that the discourse on multi-vector foreign policy appeared shortly after the discourse of 'engagement without recognition', first proposed in 2009 by Peter Semneby, at the time the EUSR for the South Caucasus. Engagement without recognition and multi-vector foreign policy will be discussed in more detail in the Chapter 6 on EU-Abkhazia and US-Abkhazia relations. Here, let us note that they are tightly connected, and that multi-vector foreign policy was likely an answer to the political overture that was the policy of engagement without recognition. This in turn begs the question: to what extent does Abkhazia have a foreign policy strategy and to what extent it is only reacting to the international environment. In other words: how proactive is Abkhazia's foreign policy?

Different visions of Abkhazia's foreign policy

Ó Beacháin (2012, 165) states that “almost nothing has been written about how this de facto state [Abkhazia] organises its domestic politics.” He adds that “the works that have examined aspects of domestic affairs within Abkhazia” have focused mostly on exploring economy, minorities, inter-ethnic relations, nation-building, civil society, or they survey popular attitudes within Abkhazia” Additionally, there have been virtually no attempts at explaining the domestic dynamics of foreign policy or at analysing different foreign policy views and the foreign policy debate in Abkhazia. The character of domestic politics in Abkhazia has a lot to do with that. Domestic politics in Abkhazia are “personal, local, and informal,” with political parties “neither consolidated nor institutionalized” (Ó Beacháin 2012, 173). Agreements are often informal, such as the “gentlemen’s agreements” regarding the divvying up of constituencies among ethnic minorities (Ó Beacháin 2015, 244). In the National Assembly, “the style of discourse is consensual and non-confrontational; even the seating arrangements reflect the lack of adversarial politics with meetings taking place in a spacious hall with seats around a large table with no obvious division of parties” (Ó Beacháin 2012, 168). Most sensitive issues – which includes foreign policy and the relations with Georgia and Russia – are not discussed publicly, making political positions hard to gauge. The political debates – including foreign policy debates – thus give a sense of false consensus and unity as “the opposition political parties hesitate to

undermine the ruling regimes in order not to endanger the ‘unity’ of the nation” (Kopeček 2017, 130).

The National Assembly “is not considered the locus of power” and is subordinate to the executive (Ó Beacháin 2012, 168). This means the foreign policy debates tend to take place informally within the executive although the executive itself is highly centralized and the President “defines the basic directions of internal and foreign policy” (Ó Beacháin 2015, 241). As “political parties “do not represent societal cleavages” (Ó Beacháin 2012, 168) and are based on strong personalities and clientelist relations rather than ideologies and programmes” (Kopeček 2017, 130), we can assume that most political debates take place not between political parties in the National Assembly but between informal political groups. According to Kopeček (2017, 131), “the most important informal institution is clientelism on the state level and clannish politics on the local level.” Virtually no literature exists on political networks involving clans in Abkhazia, much less on their attitudes towards foreign policy issues in Abkhazia. As my research focuses on external relations of Abkhazia, I have not undertaken extensive empirical research that the mapping of political clans and their positions would entail. Keeping this caveat in mind and avoiding speculation, it is possible to present only a rough contour of the foreign policy debate in Abkhazia by drawing on my interview data.

It would be wrong to assume that there is no difference in opinion regarding Abkhazia’s foreign policy and that it has stayed the same over time and in radically different contexts. Some interviewees have stated that they believe there is close to a consensus in Abkhazia regarding foreign policy objectives (Interview with Natella Akaba) or that “maybe there are some nuances, but in general it’s the same” (Interview with Viacheslav Chirikba). Others, however, pointed to greater differences in views and approaches:

“The current foreign policy makers of Abkhazia have a different approach from mine. I think our current foreign policy is made as if we were China. They behave like they are China, like a great super power, which has already achieved all of the goals and we just need to be very generous going abroad making exhibitions, presenting our country as ‘here we are’.

If I were them, I would keep trying to get recognitions and keep getting not only political recognition but would concentrate on economic recognition”
(Interview with Maxim Gvinjia).

If Abkhazia's diplomats are not proactively approaching potential engagement partners with a vision in mind and a proposal in hand, what do they do? I argue that social moves (Smith 2018) are an answer to this question and discuss them in the next section.

Proactiveness of Abkhazia's foreign policy

It is difficult to get rid of the impression that Abkhazian foreign policy has progressively been slipping into a sort of strategy of 'strategic patience' (Mitchell & Cooley 2010, 26–27). This 'knock-and-wait' approach was clear from my interview with Abkhaz policy makers: “we would like to cooperate with anybody but if the doors are all closed what can I do?” (Interview with Viacheslav Chirikba). While there are indicators pointing to the fatalism of the Abkhaz foreign policy makers,¹⁴¹ it is important to mention that my empirical data on Abkhaz proactiveness in engagement with Russia (Chapter 5) and the EU and the US contradicts this (Chapter 6). The reason is to be found in the fact that it changed over time, with 2008–2010 period representing the pinnacle of proactiveness in Abkhaz foreign policy, which subsequently declined, succumbing to the sour grapes syndrome (discussed in Chapter 7).

Tactics: social moves

As has been previously elaborated in the section Foreign policy constraints and capabilities of Chapter 4, social moves are the practical, material routines that strengthen Abkhazia's external legitimacy “in response to the stagnation of international recognition proceedings” (Smith 2018, 182). Examples include

¹⁴¹ It is interesting that during the time when I was conducting interviews in Abkhazia (January 2016), the official foreign policy concept was being prepared and was supposed to be released in a few months (Interview with Viacheslav Chirikba). However, as of November 2018, the foreign policy concept has still not been released. The reasons may be entirely domestic (the development of the concept was started by the previous government), or Abkhazia might favour this kind of strategic ambiguity in order to be more flexible in segregating Russian and Western audiences and playing various geopolitical roles (as will be suggested in Chapter 7).

'formal statements of condolences, congratulations, and solidarity', 'naming honorary consuls and representatives', 'participation in international sporting events abroad' – all employed by Abkhazia. To clarify further, social moves differ from other formal foreign policy interactions not in kind or actor but in scope. They are official interactions and can be carried out by the staff in the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs or even the Minister himself. They differ from formal foreign policy interactions in being routine and low-key, attempting to elicit reciprocity through expressions of support and solidarity. A congratulatory note sent by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia to a head of state is not likely to lead to changes in the foreign policy of that country but sustained social moves might contribute to opening of channels of communication. Even more importantly, Georgia is much less likely to protest against condolences and congratulations than to a more overt attempt at initiating relations, such as a request for a visit of the Abkhaz delegation. Social moves are a surrogate for comprehensive formal diplomatic interaction between recognised states and can also be thought of as a safe space for learning and experimenting in political communication and relationship-building in a similar vein to what Richards and Smith (2015, 1731–2) have considered non-recognition to be a political sandbox for testing different political solutions.¹⁴² In the case of formal statements made by a de facto state, the message really is the medium. By giving a statement, it is relaying the message that it can give a statement – and does – like 'every other normal' state. These messages are entirely performative – their contents do not matter, simply by being uttered, they are already acts in themselves. However, given that Abkhazia seems to lack an overarching foreign policy strategy, the social moves are better understood as routines that sustain interaction and identity and as tactics of response to the engagement of others. This is in line with Isachenko (2012, 3) view that de facto states employ different tactics, but non-recognition prevents them from having a foreign policy strategy of their own. Instead they figure as

¹⁴² Examples of Abkhazia's social moves include formal statements (condolences, congratulations, and expressions of solidarity with other leaders), the appointments of honorary representatives (to Austria, Bulgaria, China, Germany, Greece, Italy, Jordan, San Marino, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and Vatican City), and participating in international sporting competitions (within the Confederation of Independent Football Associations – CONIFA and in martial arts competitions in Armenia and Russia) (Smith 2018, 186).

objects in strategies of others and are much more reactive than proactive in their behaviour.

Despite the fact that social moves can be seen as routines with not much significance for the status of Abkhazia, they do occupy quite a lot of the MFA's time.¹⁴³ There is no better indication of how important social moves are than the fact that Minister of foreign affairs - according to his own words – spends six hours on correspondence on an average day. It is a sign that they are in fact more than foreign policy tactics but play a crucial role in ontological security as has been established before (Mitzen 2006; Chernobrov 2016).

Abkhazia's geopolitical roles

How do geopolitical roles that were introduced as part of the theoretical framework, apply empirically in the case of Abkhazia? Drawing on the historical context (Chapter 2), the analysis of Abkhazian foreign policy (Chapter 4), and its relations with Russia (Chapter 5), the EU and the US (Chapter 6), Abkhazia can be observed to play the following roles:

Divider:

- Abkhazia has prevented Georgia from achieving territorial integrity and being able to enter into regional integration frameworks, such as the EU and NATO. This role was played most prominently since Saakashvili's coming to power in 2004 and the escalation of Abkhazian-Georgian and Georgian-Russian relations.
- Requiring Georgia to keep its military expenditures high – this role has been played ever since the Georgian-Abkhaz War in 1992–1993.

¹⁴³ At least if we can judge from Maxim Gvinjia's (former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia)'s account: "A diplomat of country which is not recognised does exactly the same as one of a recognised country. Maybe I even have more job to do because I have to make every time the first step. [...] I spent three hours for correspondence in the morning, then another three or four hours for correspondence in the evening" (Baudelaire 2014).

Middle man:

- This role was not played by Abkhazia in a classical sense as it has few natural resources and few important economic transit routes. However, Abkhazia's semi-tropical climate, its status of holiday destination since Soviet times and the fact that it continues to host a plethora of FSB sanatoria and hotels (Nemtsova 2010), has given it good access to Russian political elites since the 1930s in the Soviet Union and continuing to this day.
- Abkhazia also actively tried to play this role in the run up to and during the Sochi Olympics in 2014, when it believed its location and cheap labour would enable the de facto state to attract investments in infrastructure and construction sector, respectively.

Tollman:

- Abkhazia lies on the strategically important transit corridor between Russia and South Caucasus. On the one hand, Russia has a long-standing strategic interest in building a railway link to its ally Armenia through Abkhazia and Georgia. On the other hand, Georgia has an economic interest in exporting goods to Russia through Abkhazia. Despite the fact that none of these projects have yet materialized (which is mostly due to political disagreements and lack of trust between Georgia and Abkhazia, and Georgia and Russia), the Abkhazian side has even come up with solutions how Georgian goods can be transported through Abkhazia in sealed railway carriages to prevent them from being stolen or tampered with.

Extorter:

- Abkhazia continues to attract Russian aid and investment in return for compliance and support. A good example of this is when following the Turkish downing of a Russian jet in 2016, it joined the Russian economic sanctions against Turkey. Given that Turkey, due to the largest population of Abkhaz outside of Abkhazia, is very important for Abkhazia, its

compliance in this matter was a gesture it hoped Russia would reciprocate with continued supply of aid and investment.

Keeper of the status-quo:

- Similar to the role of divider, Abkhazia has played the role of the keeper of the status quo by not only preventing the regional integration of Georgia into the Euro-Atlantic framework but has also delayed conflict resolution. By obstructing GID and not allowing Georgian refugees to return to Abkhazia, it has maintained the status-quo of de facto independence. Through disenfranchisement of Gali Georgians, renaming places, and building state institutions, it has and continues to create 'facts on the ground' and the more time that passes, the more impossible its reintegration into Georgia has become.

Emulator:

- Abkhazia started playing this role started already in 2003, when the 'standards before status' policy for Kosovo was launched. It was played most clearly by Abkhazia between 2008 and 2010 as it hoped to follow Kosovo's path and 'earn' recognition through convincing the international community that it is a responsible actor that deserves recognition for its state-building and democratisation efforts.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the analysis of Abkhazia's foreign policy and examined the meaning policy makers in Abkhazia and the actors it interacts with, attach to non-recognition, and how this affects their foreign policy behaviour.

In this context, I examined first the national identity of Abkhazia and its relevance to studying its foreign policy. I discussed in some detail each of its four components: constitutive norms, comparative categories, collective aspirations and cognitive references. The conclusion is that apswara continues to shape perceptions and behaviour of Abkhazians, including in foreign policy. Abkhazia's

relations with its kin ethnic groups in the North Caucasus, the diaspora in Turkey and the Middle East, relations with Georgia, Russia and ethnic minorities in Abkhazia are also important. They serve as 'mirrors' that shape how it perceives itself, while the perception of it as an unrecognised state by recognised actors imparts stigma on its identity that through the filter of Abkhaz cultural perceptions becomes associated with the shame of being isolated. Through the representations of Abkhazia in the domestic media, in cartography, in modelling and mimicry of recognized states, Abkhazia maintains a counter-narrative, rejecting its stigmatised identity and preserving its ontological security.

Non-recognition, the lack of foreign policy strategy, dependence on a small circle of recognisers, and lack of resources are the most important factors constraining the formulation and execution of Abkhazian foreign policy, while its MFA, diaspora network, and Russian assistance are some of the most important capabilities it is able to draw on.

Opinions on Abkhazia's main foreign policy objectives, its strategies, and how proactive it is, differ both among scholars and the Abkhazian policy makers themselves. While the empirical data (further discussed in Chapters 5 and 6) points to Abkhazians being quite proactive in meetings with EU officials, in representation and lobbying in the US, and in opposing the initial version of the Russian-Abkhazian Agreements on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support in 2014. The most proactive period was in the heyday of multi-vector foreign policy under the presidents Baghapsh and Ankvab, but with unmet expectations regarding EU and US engagement and the election of the more pro-Russian Khajimba, Abkhazia became more dependent on Russia and more fatalistic in its outlook.

Finally, I discussed social moves as important tactics for strengthening Abkhazia's external legitimacy in the absence of recognition and as a surrogate for formal diplomatic interaction that Abkhazia predominantly lacks. I discuss the opposite case of formal diplomatic relations between Abkhazia and Russia in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Russian-Abkhaz relations

“Ce n’est pas l’inégalité qui est un malheur, c’est la dépendance.”
[“It is not inequality which is the real misfortune, it is dependence.”]
– Voltaire (Dictionnaire philosophique, Article 'Égalité' (1764))

Introduction

In this chapter I examine Russian-Abkhaz relations in the context of wider geopolitical considerations (including Russia's relations with the West, Georgia and the situation in the North Caucasus), paying special attention to how Russia's own ontological (in)security and its conceptions of status and honour have shaped its foreign policy and particularly its relations with Abkhazia between 1999 and 2014. Drawing on Tsygankov's honour-centered analysis of Russian foreign policy, Morozov's (2015) referencing of ontological security and his analytical push beyond great-power politics, I have followed Russia's enduring interests and fluctuating political relations through process-tracing in two distinct periods: from 1999 and culminating with recognition in 2008 and between 2008-2014 marked by formal diplomatic ties and growing dependence of Abkhazia on Russia.

On one hand, a mere glance at books and articles that deal with the foreign policy of Russia, proves that the temptation to reduce the analysis of foreign policy of the Russian Federation to Kremlinology at best and Putinology at worst, is alive and well.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, to treat Russia just like any other (liberal

¹⁴⁴ Judging from these titles we might confuse the world's largest country by territory and with a population of around 145.000 belonging to over 170 ethnic groups with a personal fiefdom of Vladimir Putin: Putin's Russia; The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past; Putin's Russia: How It Rose; How It Is Maintained, and How It Might End; Putin And The Rise Of Russia: The Country That Came in from the Cold; Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest; Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain; From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia; The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia; All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin; Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?; Behind Putin's Curtain: Friendships and Misadventures Inside Russia; Should the West Engage Putin's Russia?; The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War; Protest in Putin's Russia; The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin etc.

democratic) country, ignoring the largely authoritarian political system that lacks democratic competitive elections, and possessing a strong presidency (a political institution) and the powerful president (an individual who occupies it), the political networks (*siloviki* and others), wide-spread corruption, and other elements that make Putin and his Kremlin's entourage so crucial to foreign policy decision-making of Russia, would be a mistake. The fact that Russian foreign policy is politicized as well as very broad and multi-layered (as one would expect for the country with the largest territory, longest borders, and most neighbours), it is necessary to approach the topic with Occam's razor in hand and a heuristic device in mind. I borrow the latter from Tsygankov. His combining of realist and constructivist approaches to understand Russia's interests and foreign policy behaviour is well suited to my project, particularly his focus on the importance of honour and status in Russia's relations with the West.¹⁴⁵ His focus on the domestic underpinnings of Russian foreign policy does a good job of avoiding over-focusing on Putin or the authoritarian nature of Russian politics, while his network-based analysis uncovers important motives and interests as well as their supporters. His way of presentation in the form of three enduring schools of Russian foreign policy (Westernizers, Statists and Civilizationists) strikes a good balance between accuracy and simplicity. Of course, one could always find figures that stand outside these schools or who can legitimately belong to two or even all three of them equally, people who have changed their positions through time etc., but this does not invalidate the overall accuracy and usefulness of the categorization). Although his periodisation¹⁴⁶ of Russian foreign policy is

Tony Wood's *Russia Without Putin* (2018) is a rare example of the contrary in which the author consciously tries to frame recent Russian political history more in terms of international contexts, domestic political institutions, power networks etc.

¹⁴⁵ Tsygankov's (2012, 7) way of combining realist and constructivist insights happens within the framework of social constructivism, because he believes that a mutually satisfactory synthesis of the two theoretical schools is impossible. Like myself, he takes "factors of power and security seriously, but [does] not view their influence as decisive in determining foreign policy." For him, possessing extensive material resources can have a dangerous effect of reinforcing policy assertiveness, but this does not amount to a cause-effect relationship. Instead, "what determines Russia's foreign policy is the national ideal of honourable behaviour augmented by its available material capabilities."

¹⁴⁶ Thorun (2009) distinguishes four distinct periods in Russian FP, with the first two being relevant here: the strong alignment with the West from 1992 to 1993/94; and the increasing ambiguity and assertiveness from 1993/94 to 2000. In the 1991–1993 period, Russia was not a unified political actor.

sensible, I am using a different timeline and focus on different watershed moments, since I examine the Russian-Abkhaz relations specifically.

Identity and foreign policy of Russia in 1990s

Russia's foreign policy does not exist in a vacuum but has been "formed in different external contexts, while responding to some similar sets of security challenges." (Tsygankov 2016, 2). There is no independently existing Russian foreign policy identity that precedes interaction; it exists only through interaction and is a product of this interaction, especially Russia's interaction with the West (*ibid.*, 9). Specifically, it is the perceived (in)equality of this interaction and the (non-)recognition of status that shape the foreign policy choices of Russia (*ibid.*, 1). Despite establishing solid foundations for analyzing Russian foreign policy, Tsygankov's approach lacks two elements to be applicable to my project – both addressed by Morozov (2015), which I address next.

First, despite discussing both the geopolitical context and identity (with emphasis on interests, honour and status), Tsygankov does not go as far as introducing the concept of ontological security or does not connect them in any other way. Morozov (2015, 60) recognises Tsygankov's honour-centered approach as close to but not focused on ontological security. He concedes that it makes sense to use ontological security theory in explaining seemingly "inconsistent or outright irrational" behaviour of Russia. Rooting Russia's othering of the West in its "desire to overcome ontological insecurity" can help explain a pattern of reliance on conflictual routines, especially during crises, like the one following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Morozov 2015, 57). According to Morozov (2015, 40), ontological security theory may help us understand "what exactly happens when the outsiders face the profound ambiguity of their international status". However, he avoids delving deeper into ontological security because he fears that its discursive approach would make results non-generalizable in cross-country comparisons. While Morozov's identification of ontological security approach with discursivity (Morozov 2015, 60–61) is wrong (which is explained by his reliance on Steele's discursive conceptualization of ontological security) as he ignores Mitzen's (2006) non-discursive approach, his worry about generalizability is

justified. However, since mine is a single-case study, the doubts regarding the use of ontological security approach do not apply.

Second, Tsygankov considers the importance of relations with the West and with other great powers (what I call horizontal relations) for Russian identity and foreign policy but does not go past great power politics. For him Russian relationship to Georgia and Abkhazia is little more than a function of Russia's great power aspirations – the horizontal relationships determine the vertical relationships. Yet, as I argue, Russia's imperial history is as much an *inspiration* for great power status as Russia's sense of honour and status are the basis of its *aspirations* to great power status. Morozov (2015, 65) understands Russia's as a hybrid identity "shaped by multi-vectored colonial encounters", an internalised "subaltern identity", which continues to be externally defined. It is, equally, an imperial identity which prides itself in civilizing its periphery by promoting its hegemonic order among the populations of the periphery that are in subaltern positions in relation to the Russian imperial centre. To Morozov (*ibid.*) this represents the conflict between the role of the colonial Master and the role of a colonised native, both roles deeply ingrained in Russia's identity, which results in "stigma' or 'ontological insecurity', so characteristic of the Russian being in the world." Here we have not only the influence of horizontal relationships of big power politics on state identity, but also the weight of vertical relationships of hegemony.¹⁴⁷ Morozov sees the reason for Russia's subaltern identity not in the subjective perceptions of Russian foreign policy elites of the West as hypocritical, imperialistic, expansionist, and harmful to Russia, but claims that the peripheral position of Russia originates in "the capitalist logic of uneven and combined development" (Morozov 2015, 66). It can thus be concluded that Russia's imperial identity is based both on the perceptions of Russia's vertical relations with its former imperial lands, now independent countries in its 'Near Abroad' as well as on the perceptions of geopolitical notions, such as encroachment and encirclement by the West. Similarly, Russia's subaltern identity is based both on the perceptions of Russia's horizontal relations with great powers as well as on the perceptions of geo-economic notions, such as underdevelopment,

¹⁴⁷ Russia has a hybrid imperial/subaltern identity, but so does Georgia, which Andrei Sakharov called the 'little empire' due to its historical ethnic diversity (Petersen 2008, 11).

technological gap, and the need to modernize. Having established the basic coordinates of Russia's identity relevant to its foreign policy, I now turn to the first of its main elements: ontological and geopolitical (in)security.

Ontological & geopolitical (in)security

Russia is blessed with the largest territory of any country and a wealth of natural resources. However, it also has the longest borders and most neighbours among all countries. Few geographical barriers protect its European core (Tsygankov 2012, 31), which lies in the flat and vulnerable North European Plain. Likewise, the Eurasian Steppe to the south and east makes for an easy access to the core – a fact well known to those familiar with the earlier periods of Russian history, in which a loose federation of Rus struggled against succeeding invasions and raids by the nomadic horsemen, such as Khazars, Cumans (Polovtsi), Petchenegs, Kipchaks, before finally succumbing to the Mongol invasion in mid-13th century. Russia's geography and history thus present objective challenges and as such contribute to the sense of insecurity. Nevertheless, whatever challenges it presents, Russia's geography does not form its political choices, at least not directly and deterministically. As scholars working in the Critical Geopolitics tradition (most notably Toal 1996) have stated, it is politics that write geography and not the other way around. In other words, geographical challenges and historical experiences must be interpreted in a specific way for them to become sources of insecurity. Tsygankov (2016, 108) illustrates this point well by noting that Foreign minister and later Prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, recognised that NATO's expansion "is not a military problem; it is a psychological one" (Tsygankov 2016, 108). Primakov, a statist and realist proponent of power balancing seemed to understand well that Russia's security problem is not about geopolitics, the (in)balance of powers or military hardware per se, but about perceptions of that; in the other words, that the threat was the threat to Russia's ontological security.¹⁴⁸ Historically, Russia's preoccupation with border security

¹⁴⁸ Hansen (2016, 359) draws on public opinion polls in Russia to show how much the sense of insecurity can change (in this case increase) when interpretations change (due to political and economic changes in both the international and domestic contexts): "The number of respondents who believe that Russia is faced with enemies [rose] – from a mere 13% in 1989 over 41% in 1994 and 65% in 1999 to a full 78% in 2013."

became predominant in the fifteenth century, and it is in the same period that great power reputation and political independence were important parts of Russia's conception of honour (Tsygankov 2012, 31). Guarding the border of the Russian state also meant preserving its independence and honour, demonstrating that physical and ontological security in Russia have been inextricably linked for centuries. Indeed, one should not understand physical and ontological security as separate or even opposites.¹⁴⁹

Ontological security through othering

For Morozov (2015), Russia's ontological insecurity comes from the fact that its European identity has been overshadowed by the imperial legacy. It was the dialectic between the subaltern and the imperial that produced a sense of ontological insecurity stemming from the inability to preserve a stable "self-concept as a European nation." This ontological security then produced resentment that eventually transformed into the antagonization and othering of the West. (Morozov 2015, 104).¹⁵⁰ Hansen (2016, 359–360) notes that that by employing the concept of 'ontological security' suggests that this othering has helped consolidate the fragile notion of 'Russianness' and thus helps explain its positive reception by the Russian public.¹⁵¹ Akchurina & Della Salla (2018, 1652) have pointed to the fact that adversarial relations between Russia and the EU, "could mutually reinforce ontological insecurity," highlighting how a conflict – even a seemingly irrational one – can serve concrete state needs. Even if their claim that "the EU's eastwards enlargement has led to states such as Poland and

¹⁴⁹ See Ejodus (2018) on the importance of predictability of the physical environment for ontological security.

¹⁵⁰ Whenever the concept of the relations with the West is invoked in the context of foreign policy, it is good to keep in mind Hopf's (2005, 227) thought that "The conversations between Putin and Schroeder /.../ tend to reproduce a European identity for Russia that is both being expressed at the very highest official state level and reverberating throughout Russian society on a reciprocal basis. No such reverberation is possible when Putin meets with Bush, as there is a vanishingly small level of identification with the United States among the Russian public. The United States is not a significant Other for Russian identity construction at home; Europe is." However, one could argue that in recent years Russian officials have progressively dumped both the EU and the US in the basket of the West.

¹⁵¹ Browning (2017, 111) believes that "EU conceptions of self-identity" are similarly reaffirmed by viewing Russia "as a laggard, mired in historically anachronistic modes of thinking, becoming increasingly authoritarian and fully expected to suffer continuing economic, social, political and even military decline, and therefore only destined for greater marginalisation."

Hungary undermining the EU's liberal narratives," may have some validity, Russia – on the contrary – seems to have benefited from increased ontological security through rallying around the flag because of strained political relations and economic sanctions. The takeaway from considering ontological security of Russia through relationships with great powers and the West in particular, is that these horizontal relations have an impact on vertical relations, including the relationship between Russia and Georgia, and Russia and Abkhazia. However, focusing on the mirror processes of othering in Russia and the West, have limited applicability to my project. It is an ahistorical truism as shown by Neumann (1996, 208), who noted that there is no reason why Russia wouldn't be counted as part of Europe.

Ontological security through routines

Theorists of ontological security understand that identity is formed and sustained through relationships (Mitzen 2006, 342) and the discourses, script and narratives of othering form the context of these relationships. Having explored the sources of Russia's ontological (in)security, I now proceed to answering the question how ontological security is sustained. According to Mitzen (2006, 342), actors reach ontological security especially through relations with significant others. Because continued agency necessitates cognitive certainty provided by these routines, these actors then get attached to their social relationships.¹⁵² Chernobrov (2016, 583–584) understands Russia's ontological security through routines. Actors prefer known, practiced and recognizable forms of interaction, even if they may be detrimental to their security, as we have seen in the Ukrainian crisis, where familiar Cold War routines have been observed. According to Chernobrov (2016, 583–584), the fact that the threat is familiar to all sides, is both attractive to them as well as dangerous as it gives them an illusion of predictability and prevents them from seeing "other dimensions of the problem and leads to a known and well-rehearsed routine of policy escalation and popular suspicion." At this point ontological security departs from physical survival as the states in this

¹⁵² Hence, dependence of Abkhazia on Russia may not come only from Russia providing physical security and economic investment, but also from the dependence on the established routines of interaction.

situation may favour continuity and routine (social actions aimed at satisfying their self-identity needs) to the point of compromising their physical security or even existence.

Status and honour after the ‘geopolitical catastrophe’

In *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honour in International Relations*, published in 2012, Tsygankov argues that Russia’s seeking of security, power, and welfare are filtered through cultural belief in which conceptions of honour supply a framework for organizing and producing “policies of cooperation, defensiveness, and assertiveness in relation to the West.” He uses ten case studies from the Russian history including the Holy Alliance, the Triple Entente, and the Russia–Georgia war to demonstrate that when Russia sees that its sense of honour is recognised, it maintains a cooperative stance towards the West. In the opposite case it adopts independent policies in either a defensive or assertive manner (Tsygankov 2012). According to Tsygankov (2012, xi) Russia’s conception of honour, which continues to shape its foreign policy, harks back to the premodern era before the emergence of the system of nation-states. He distinguishes between two dimensions of Russia’s honour – European and local (Tsygankov 2012, 5); that is the international and local audience. Depending on whether Russia’s sense of honour is challenged by the West or not, Russia tends to adopt different foreign policies. This depends on what Tsygankov terms “Russia’s internal confidence”, a reflection of material power and the perception of that power by the political elites. This confidence is the “ability to pursue an independent foreign policy that determines whether Russia chooses a defensive or assertive direction.” (Tsygankov 2012, 5).¹⁵³

The limits of my project prevent me from delving deep into Russian history to uncover the sources of Russia’s modern identity, its conceptions of status and

¹⁵³ The fact that honour shapes interaction does not mean this interaction is honourable, or as Tsygankov (2012, 6) puts it: “To argue that honour shapes foreign policy is not to characterize an international behaviour as honourable. Rather, it is to draw scholarly attention to the moral and ethical implications a state action entails and to raise the question of responsibility for episodes of misunderstanding and failed cooperation in Russia–West relations.”

honour, and how they came to influence its foreign policy.¹⁵⁴ Instead, I limit myself to discussing the significance of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet 'Yeltsin years (1991–1999) as the formative period for the contemporary Russian state. I have three reasons for this. First, the period is in Russia commonly seen as one of downfall and chaos, a tragedy for the population facing the collapse of state structures and safety nets, economic crisis, de-industrialization, unemployment, inflation, poverty, crime, and oligarch privatizations. For the state and policy makers it was a 'geopolitical catastrophe', a dramatic fall in Russia's power, prestige, status, and honour. The period accentuated Russia's ontological insecurity and inspired its later assertiveness. Second, this period of Russia's withdrawal from the post-Soviet space is crucial for understanding the development of Russian-Georgian and Russian-Abkhaz relationships, as well as Georgian-Abkhaz relationships. Since my research focuses on Abkhazia's foreign interaction and engagement between 1999 and 2014, I do not discuss the 1991–1999 period at in-depth in other parts of the thesis. Discussing it here therefore fills this lacuna. Third, in this chapter I start with more conceptual discussions of Russia's identity and ontological security. I use the discussion of the 'Yeltsin years' to provide empirical historical context for the conceptual framework, and as a bridge between analytical concepts and the analysis of Russian-Abkhaz relations that takes up the rest of the chapter.

Russian-Abkhaz relations between 1999-2008

On the last day of 1999 Yeltsin resigned from the Presidency in favour of Vladimir Putin, who took over, buoyed by popularity over major military campaign against the Chechen rebels. Putin, who was relatively unknown until he was chosen to succeed Yeltsin, entered the stage of Russian politics at a difficult moment. Russia was again in war with the Chechen separatists and the EU introduced sanctions in response to Russia's military campaign in January 2000. This was an additional burden as Russia was still recovering from the 1998 financial crisis.

¹⁵⁴ Looking at the cultural history of Russia (Billington 2010; Figs 2002), one gets an impression that Russia's is a culture based on honour – its preservation and maximisation. Perhaps no other period is as indicative of this as the 19th century Russia of duels fought between noblemen (Alexander Pushkin even died in one).

However, with Putin in power during the 2000s, the Russian state had recovered a large part of its policy autonomy (Tsygankov 2016, 24). The successful yet merciless campaign in Chechnya made Putin popular with the Russian voters, even more so when his government was able to restore the economy to growth by 2000 (Kanet & Piet 2014, 2), largely due to rapidly rising oil prices.¹⁵⁵ In March 26, 2000, Putin consolidated power by winning in the presidential election, while his inner circle was taking over the state-controlled media (Toal 2017, 300). In the same year Shevardnadze was re-elected president of Georgia amid allegations of irregularities and vote-rigging. In Abkhazia, Ardzinba was still in power, although in February 2000 the movement Aitaira (Revival) appeared, calling for reforms. A much less cooperative parliament was elected prompting frequent clashes between the president and parliament. In the US, George W. Bush was elected President. All this was good news for Russia: Shevardnadze and Ardzinba represented predictability and stability, while – according to Putin – a Republican in the White House offered an opportunity for the improvement of US-Russian relations (Zygar 2016). This opportunity came with the terrorist attacks against the US on 9th September 2011. Putin used the context of growing threats of terrorism to establish a partnership with the US and emphasized the importance of jointly addressing this common strategic threat (Tsygankov 2012, 44). He was among the first world leaders to send condolences to President Bush after the attacks and helped the US acquire access to military bases in Central Asia to aid them in the war in Afghanistan (Kanet & Piet 2014, 2–3). Putin insisted on the preservation of Russia's great power status, but his strategy was markedly different from the one employed by Primakov before him. He did not continue with balancing against the West, but rather bandwagoned with the EU and the US, insisting on Russia's identity being European and Western (Tsygankov 2016, 20).

The key insight from this period is the demonstrated importance of ontological security through routines as Russia's relationship with the West at that time was important for Russia's self-perception as a great power. Abkhazia at this time

¹⁵⁵ Putin is often referred to as the president who restored Russia's greatness through his assertiveness, power politics, and brinksmanship. However, even before that, Putin was the first to introduce "the economic dimension into the discourse of Russia's greatness and its foreign policy programme." (Samokhvalov 2017, 213).

barely figured as an issue of Russia's foreign policy except perhaps in Russia's genuine efforts to play the role of the mediator as part of its aspirations to regain the great power status.

The Russian-Georgian-Abkhaz conundrum 1999-2001

In the early 2000s Russian foreign policy was still firmly supportive of Georgia. Even though Abkhazia applied to become part of the Russian federation as an independent associated state (having previously applied to become a Russian republic), Russia rejected the request (Zhemukov 2012) with president Putin stating that "Russia's fundamental position is that Georgia's territorial integrity should be maintained" (Jeffries 2003, 130). During this time, Russia's activity in Georgia and Abkhazia was mostly focused on peacekeeping while continuing with the closure of its bases in Georgia (Lieven 2001). Russia and Georgia signed agreements on the return of refugees and the economic rehabilitation of the zone affected by the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Within the framework of the Istanbul OSCE commitments, between 2000 and 2001, Russia pulled out its heavy weapons and closed the military bases in Gudauta and Vaziani (Samokhvalov 2017, 181). Early on in Putin's presidency, Russia was therefore a cooperative actor, a reliable partner, and sincerely interested in conflict resolution for the benefits of security in the region. According to Samokhvalov (2017 181–2), Russia was not hesitant to apply pressure on Abkhaz authorities when they resisted Russia's negotiation efforts, however Toal and O'Loughlin (2016, 110) report that economic sanctions against Abkhazia in place since 1996, were eased by 2000. Even more remarkable is that Russia continued to be on friendly terms with Georgia, while the latter was turning noticeably towards the US. This pro-US turn in the last years of Shevardnadze's presidency is often overlooked due to Saakashvili's even more radical and vocal embrace of the US. However, according to Toal (2017, 107), Shevardnadze was very successful in lobbying the US to send aid to Georgia, making Georgia the third-largest recipient of US aid per-capita by 2001. This was an incredible achievement for a small post-Soviet country run by a former Communist that lacked strategic resources, powerful diaspora networks, or a democratic pedigree.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this section is that small states that can punch above their weight are not limited to the highly developed Nordic countries, but that even Georgia by the turn of the millennium, which was almost a failed state a few years ago, was able to profit immensely from the geopolitical situation in a region of increasing importance and competing interests. This in turn, is a testament to the importance of wider geopolitical dynamics for the local and regional conflicts, but also a testament to the importance of playing the right geopolitical role and playing it right. While Georgia was turning things around, Abkhazia too was slowly able to turn the situation in its favour, by slowly improving relations with Russia that gradually lifted its embargo.

Russian-Abkhaz rapprochement 2002-2003

Already in 2002, however, the relationship between Russia and Georgia began to decline. In April, US special forces arrived to train and equip Georgian forces for counterterrorist operations, a move seen by Russia as deeply threatening to its interests in the region. The fears were compounded by Russian fears that Georgia was harbouring Chechen militants in Pankisi. In September, Putin went as far as warning of military action if Georgia failed to deal with Chechen militants (Brecher 2018, 267). In October, Georgia mounted an antiterrorism operation against Chechen rebels on its territory. Several suspected guerrillas were killed or detained and extradited to Russia. This had restored the relationship somewhat, but Russia already started hedging its bets by adopting a more favourable approach towards Abkhazia (George 2009, 132). In December 2002 the train connection from Sochi to Sukhum/i was restored with the help of Russian investment. During the same year, Russian CIS peacekeeping units in Abkhazia started providing security to the Abkhazians, while Russia started granting Abkhazians and South Ossetians partial citizenship (George 2009, 133) based on the new federal law on citizenship (Federal Law no. 18 cl. 2500) adopted by the Duma (Souleimanov & Abrahamyan 2017, 9) in what can be considered the beginning of Russia's 'passportisation policy'. This policy turn can be partially explained by Russia tactically responding to Georgia's pro-US and allegedly pro-Chechen policy. However, it is no coincidence that in the same year, Putin re-introduced the idea of greatness in Russian foreign policy, stressing that

“that Russia would be either great or nothing (*velikoi ili nikakoi*)” (Samokhvalov 2017, 213), which points to the fact that this was part of the larger foreign policy shift that touched upon Russia’s ontological security. The logic was that Russia can only exist as a great power, if it loses its greatness, it ceases to exist. A more clear illustration of ontological security as a relationship between existence and identity would be hard to find. Another important change was Russia’s more differentiated view of the West. Putin’s statements clearly articulated that Russia’s interest was in developing strategic relationships with the EU member states (Tsygankov 2016, 143) although his view of NATO soon became more sceptical. Nevertheless, when speaking about Ukraine’s entry into NATO in May 2002, he stated that “At the end of the day the decision is to be taken by NATO and Ukraine. It is a matter for those two partners” (Toal 2017, 207).

This period in Russian relations with Abkhazia has more to do with Russia’s relations with Georgia and the West than the dynamics of the Russian-Abkhaz relationship itself. There seemed to be an inconsistency as political deceit or as genuine desire to maintain good relations with the West that is conditioned by respect for Russia’s honour and status. However, this possibility of a double interpretation suggests that in this period relationship routines with the West (which Russia found disappointing) were not anymore enough to maintain its ontological security and that Russia was starting to rely more and more on othering to portray itself as a great power not in cooperation but in competition with the West. It is in this period that Abkhazia’s physical security started to strengthen but at a price of increasing dependence on Russia. It is clear that this process, which is often traced to Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia in 2008, has much deeper roots.

Saakashvili and the fall of Georgian-Russian relations 2004-2005

In January 2004, Mikhail Saakashvili was elected president of Georgia and in February declared the intention of joining NATO. In March the alliance added seven new members and for the first time expanded into the post-Soviet space. Despite being sceptical about the ‘Rose Revolution’ (Toal 2017, 147), Putin met

Saakashvili in Moscow to sign a good neighbour treaty in February. In May, Georgia restored control over Adjara, with Kremlin taking the Georgian side and engaging in conflict-resolution. Adjara was home to a Russian military base and was strategically important for its energy distribution port and as a key border crossing with Turkey. Adjara was also a region well-suited for Russia to cross Saakashvili's plans. However, Foreign Minister Ivanov and Putin got personally involved to broker Aslan Abashidze's exile to Moscow in a move that enabled Saakashvili to sell as his great victory (Toal 2017, 147). Kanet (2007, 108) also claims that Putin's responses to the Rose Revolution in late 2003 and the Adjara crisis in early 2004 were signs of a 'softer' approach, a less negative reaction to events that were not going in the direction Russia wanted them to.¹⁵⁶ Russian leadership clearly enjoyed playing the role of mediator, hoping the consolidation of vertical relationships and acting as a responsible and constructive partner would help in it being taken more seriously by other great powers.

Russia, however, was willing to concede Adjara, a largely ethnic Georgian region, but warned against taking the same approach to reincorporate Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Toal 2017, 147). These warnings notwithstanding, in June Georgia decided to forcibly crack down on smuggling in South Ossetia, prompting harsh criticism from the Ossetian leadership as well as from Russia. "In August 2004 the Kremlin's expectations of honour were violated, when Tbilisi used force against South Ossetia /.../ Putin responded by calling for Georgia to show restraint and honour its pledge to resolve sovereignty disputes peacefully" (Tsygankov 2012, 244). Domestic politics have meanwhile reshuffled the cards so that by the end of 2004 both Georgia and Abkhazia had new governments, and Putin won the 2004 presidential elections, securing his second term. However, while Saakashvili and Putin were elected with more than 95% and 70% of votes cast, respectively, Abkhazian presidential elections produced a surprise with the pro-Kremlin candidate Raul Khajimba losing to Sergei Baghapsh (Hale 2014, 204–205). Despite having the support of Ardzinba and Putin, Khajimba failed to win the first round of the presidential election, which had to be repeated after a wave

¹⁵⁶ Putin allegedly warned Saakashvili over the phone: "OK, Mikheil Mikheilovich, we helped you on this one, but remember very well, there will be no more free gifts offered to you, on South Ossetia and Abkhazia" (Toal 2017, 147).

of protests. The election was won by an opposition candidate Sergei Bagapsh, but the Russian pressure forced him to create a government of national unity, allocating several seats to Khadjimba's followers. Nevertheless, a gradual process of democratisation was set in motion (Kopeček et al. 2016, 93). The final blow of 2004 for Russia came from Ukraine, where the 'Orange Revolution' took place, with Yushchenko coming up on top of Russia-backed Yanukovich. On one hand, 2004 saw the expansion of the EU by ten and of NATO by seven members, stretching both all the way up to Russia's borders. On the other hand, it seemed like Russia was losing its influence over the countries outside these integrations, while the EU was strengthening its cooperation with them through the ENP. Finally, Russia seemed to have lost the power to call shots not only in Georgia and Ukraine, but even in Abkhazia. It seemed Russia now had problems not only in horizontal relations with the West, but also had lost credibility and influence vis-a-vis the former Soviet republics, damaging its vertical relations and compromising its ontological security. While Russia has restored its economy and Putin consolidated political power, its foreign policy was far from desired and would soon change to a more assertive course to restore its sense of honour and status. One of the early signs of that was Russia's move to block the prolongation of the existing OSCE Border Monitoring Operation on the Russian-Georgian border, which thus expired on December 31, 2008. Russia, which was so eager to play the role of the mediator to impress its Western partners, was moving away from this role and towards a more unilateral interest-based foreign policy, mimicking what it perceived to be US unilateralism. According to Toal (2017, 281), by the summer of 2004, Putin's government made the support for Georgia's breakaway regions one of the core national security interests.

The key insight from this period is that Abkhazia comes into the focus of Russia's foreign policy and we can observe greater agency on the part of the Abkhaz the beginnings of Abkhazian geopolitical role play. Indeed, I have not so far discussed proactiveness on the side of the Abkhaz simply because by all accounts, in this period there was very little of it.¹⁵⁷ Not being seen as part of

¹⁵⁷ I have explained Abkhazia's efforts to move from a univectoral to (a more) multi-vector foreign policy in Chapter 4. In Chapter 6, concrete examples of Abkhazian proactiveness in foreign policy are discussed based on empirical interview data.

Russia's core interests, CIS sanctions, and stigmatized by the international community, Abkhazians had modest success in lobbying the local political elites in Krasnodar and Moscow (including its former mayor Luzhkov) to help ease the embargo but could do little more until geopolitical circumstances became more favorable.

The preludes of Kosovo precedent and NATO expansion

Early in 2006, tensions between Russia and the West flared up again over Kosovo. Putin resented NATO's 1999 intervention in Serbia and strongly opposed any moves towards the independence of the separatist region. The words of Sergey Mironov, the Speaker of the Federation Council in March 2006 mirrored Putin's earlier pronouncements: "We are closely watching what is happening in Kosovo. The situation there is very similar to South Ossetia, and they are heading toward the establishment of an independent state" (Tsereteli 2018, 9). Similarly, the president of Abkhazia Sergey Bagapsh declared that "if Kosovo is recognised, Abkhazia will be recognised in the course of three days. I am absolutely sure of that" (Popescu, 2007: 18). Two years later Bagapsh would be proven right on making the connection, but six months off regarding his assessment of the speed of the succession of events. It was in 2006 that Russian-Georgian relations started worsening persistently. Already in January explosions on the Russian side of the Russian-Georgian border cut gas and electricity supplies, with Saakashvili blaming Russia for the disruption. Less than two months later Russia banned imports of Georgian wine (Peimani 2009, 57), while in July 2006 Georgia insisted on the departure of Russian peacekeepers from South Ossetia and Abkhazia, asking for them to be substituted by international peacekeepers. In the same month, Georgian troops reestablished control over Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia, with Georgia announcing it will move the pro-Tbilisi government-in-exile there. In September and October more incidents followed, including the shelling of the helicopter carrying the Georgian Defence Minister Okruashvili in South Ossetia, and the detention of Russian army officers in Georgia on espionage charges. Russia reacted by imposing further sanctions, cutting transport links and expelling hundreds of Georgians (Radio Free Europe 2007).

Saakashvili's initial approach to the breakaway states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was a mix of liberal idealist soft power to entice the populations of the entities and the contradictory nationalist hardline stance of non-compromising on Georgian territorial integrity (Toal 2017, 144). The absence of coherent strategy failed to convince the Abkhazians and Ossetians, making Saakashvili impatient and reckless. Already in 2004, Saakashvili moved to increase pressure on South Ossetia. He tightened border controls, broke up a large smuggling operation, reportedly sending hundreds of police, military, and intelligence officers into South Ossetia (Nichol 2008, 3). Tensions with the de facto states and Russia running ever-higher, Saakashvili made a series of aggressive moves which are hard to understand but can perhaps be explained with him still being drunk on his success in Adjara (Toal 2017, 147) and severely misjudging that the situation there was like the one in South Ossetia (Artman 2013, 688–9). Saakashvili gathered a contingent of 12,000 American-trained Georgian soldiers, who took part in "manoeuvres" in July, before attacking Tskhinvali on the night of 7 August. It was a full-scale attack involving heavy tanks, artillery, Grad rockets and cluster bombs, which killed civilians as well as Russian peacekeepers and caused 24,000 residents of South Ossetia to flee the region (Marshall 2010, 306). On the same day, Russia stated that NATO should reconsider its plans to admit Georgia into the alliance in the light of the Georgian military assault on South Ossetia.

One takeaway from examining this period of Russian-Abkhaz relations is that we can observe not just the proactiveness of Abkhazian foreign policy but also a newfound confidence stemming from the recognition of Kosovo, giving hope to several de facto states that a precedent and a way towards recognition has been established by achieving the 'standards before status' and 'earning' recognition.

After the 2008 War

I have covered the 2008 War in Chapter 2 and continue the process-tracing with its aftermath. The 2008 War was a clear message that Russia will not tolerate the expansion of Western influence on its doorstep, that it will not allow any other former Soviet state to become NATO member and that it is prepared to use force to protect its interests in the neighbourhood (Rumer et al. 2017). In April 2009

Abkhazia and South Ossetia signed an agreement with Russia to allow the latter to guard their borders, a move strongly condemned by Georgia (Associated Press, 4/30/09). In June of the same year, Moscow vetoed a resolution to extend the mandate of UN monitors in Abkhazia (Reuters, 6/16/09). In September Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez recognised the pro-Russian rebel regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states (Reuters 9/10/09) followed by the tiny Pacific island of Nauru in December 2009 (Reuters, 12/15/09). There would be no recognitions until 2011 and the focus shifted to Abkhazia's domestic politics. In December 2009, presidential elections were held in which Sergei Bagapsh unexpectedly defeated the Moscow-backed Raul Khajimba. (Associated Press, 12/13/09). Under Bagapsh, Abkhazia led the so-called 'multi-vector foreign policy', attempting to establish relations with other states and international organisations. The EU and the US responded with the policy of 'engagement without recognition' but it brought little results. US policy was one of "managing the status quo rather than seeking breakthroughs or launching new initiatives," (Rumer et al. 2017) which resulted in a shift from the US to the EU as the main actor in the South Caucasus (*ibid.*).

The ceasefire agreement brokered by the French president Sarkozy (also at that time presiding the EU) after the August war in 2008 stipulated that new negotiations will take place between Russia and Georgia: The Geneva International Discussions with three co-chairs: UN, OSCE, and EU, with US present but not given a leading role (Hille 2010, 201). The first round in October 2008 was marred by disputes on who should be present at the negotiations. Georgia only wanted to negotiate with Russia and didn't want Abkhazian and South Ossetian delegations to be present. Russia on the contrary insisted on the presence of Abkhazian and South Ossetian delegations not only as parties of the conflict, but also as independent states which it recognised. Due to disagreements, the meeting was postponed until November" (Hille 2010, 201-2). During the second round, all parties were incorporated into the process but met informally in working groups, "giving Georgia the idea that the Abkhazian and South Ossetian delegations had lower status." (Hille 2010, 202). The negotiations were asymmetrical as the position of Russia and Georgia were stronger than the position of Abkhazia and South Ossetia not only due to their limited recognition,

but also because the mediators, the UN, OSCE and EU, all voiced support for Georgian territorial integrity. This raised the question of the neutrality of the mediators (Hille 2010, 203).

Russian-Abkhaz relations between 2009-2014

After the August War, relations between Russia and Abkhazia changed radically. Recognition and the agreements signed between Russia and Abkhazia meant security guarantees, economic assistance, social de-isolation, and above all the hope of future recognitions. It was of huge symbolic importance for a people, who has been largely ignored by the international community. Recognition was to the Abkhaz not just international diplomatic recognition, but also a recognition of their identity as separate from the Georgian, the recognition of their struggle in the Georgian-Abkhaz war, and the “recognition of their state-building efforts”¹⁵⁸ (Interview with a Russian MFA official).¹⁵⁹ This increased the foreign policy confidence of Abkhazian decision-makers and prompted them to embark on the multi-vector foreign policy of actively seeking recognition. However, soon after the recognition, paradoxically, fears of growing dependence of Abkhazia and Ossetia on Russia arose (Popescu 2009; Egorova & Babin 2015, 94–95; Bakke et al. 2018,162) as the two de facto states have outsourced several state functions to Russia, above all, citizenship, becoming synonymous with Russia’s ‘passportisation’ policy (Krasniqi 2018, 21). Berg & Vits (2018, 7) have argued that this was due to their limited recognition by other actors. They believe that “the provision of security and economic incentives” by the patron state turns de facto states into completely dependent, making the existing ties under the guise of strategic partnership increasingly deeper, turning them into constraints, except if the de facto state tries to actively oppose its growing reliance by diversifying its

¹⁵⁸ It would be difficult to claim that the Russian official knows what the meaning of recognition was for the Abkhazians. However, it does point to the fact that struggle in the Georgian-Abkhaz war and “state-building efforts” were mentioned as criteria (if we take the interviewee at face value) or at least justifications for Russia’s recognition. While Russian officials may never know what exactly recognition means to the Abkhazians, some seem to understand better than their Western counterparts (at least judging by my own interview data) that recognition has an important emotional and symbolic value for the Abkhaz.

¹⁵⁹ To maintain consistency of foreign policy after recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia was also forced to change its discourse on and obstruction to Kosovo’s campaign for recognition (Newman & Visoka 2016, 13).

engagement (Berg & Vits 2018, 7). I argue that the latter was indeed the case of Abkhazia, but not South Ossetia.

Examining the start of the 2009-2014 period, it is possible to observe the first signs of Abkhazia's disappointment with the engagement strategies of the EU and the US. Recognitions were not forthcoming while engagement was deemed insufficient. As I discuss in Chapter 6, it was in 2009, after a year of cooperation, that Abkhazia decided to end the contract with the Saylor company hired to represent the Abkhaz, communicate in their name and lobby for them in the US. While the recognitions in 2008 raised the expectations of Abkhaz policy makers high, they soon came crashing down.

Further recognitions and Georgian attempts at re-engagement

Nicaragua and Venezuela recognised Abkhazia in September 2008 and September 2009, respectively. Russia's political relationships with the two countries were instrumental in securing both recognitions (Cooley & Mitchell 2010, 62). After Nauru recognised Abkhazia in December 2009, the recognition process stalled, but in May and September 2011, Vanuatu and Tuvalu,¹⁶⁰ respectively recognised Abkhazia prompting fears in Georgia, that the recognition process might continue. Georgia wanted to make sure that any engagement of the international community with Abkhazia would be done on its own terms, and it intended to take a pro-active stance in this. On the one hand, it tried to sanction unauthorised interactions. The Parliament of Georgia adopted in June 2011 a package of legislative amendments providing for the issuance of neutral identification and travel documents to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The documents, called "status neutral travel documents" to allowed residents of Abkhazia to travel abroad and enjoy social benefits in Georgia. However, "such a document could only be acquired by travelling to Georgian-controlled territory and this is politically or socially difficult for most Abkhaz." Additionally, the passports had a distinct code that identified the holder as a resident of Abkhazia,

¹⁶⁰ Tuvalu's recognition remains contested as Georgia claims that it later retracted its recognition, while Abkhazia states otherwise (Pender 2018).

which would allow Georgia to regulate the contact of Abkhazians with the outside world (Caspersen 2018, 10–11). In a tactical move to draw a wedge between the Abkhazians and their Circassian kin, in May 2011, Georgia recognised the Circassian genocide, prompting Abkhazians to start commemorating their Day of Genocide jointly with the Circassians on 21 May (abandoning their traditional May 31 commemoration) (Barton 2015). All these moves intended to isolate Abkhazia and pre-empt further recognition, didn't prevent the former president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze from declaring in June 2011 that the recognition of Abkhazia by Georgia would be a sensible option, particularly in regard to the facilitation of the return of the Georgian refugees to this territory (Coppieters 2018, 1009).

In the end, EU's policy of 'engagement without recognition', Georgia's policy of engagement with the intention of re-incorporation, and Russia's policy of engagement on behalf of Abkhazia to secure recognitions for its independence, all failed to produce tangible results, leaving Abkhazia largely isolated. A combination of sour grapes (inability to sustain high expectations and preserve honor despite not achieving them, for instance the self-unacceptability of being seen to 'beg for recognition') and fatalism (learned helplessness as a result of unsuccessful engagement) made Abkhazia progressively lose first its confidence, then its interest in diversifying its foreign policy, slowly succumbing to a growing dependence on Russia.

Abkhazia's growing dependence on Russia

Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Georgian efforts to isolate the two entities as well as the departure of UN observers from Georgia in June 2009 (due to the Russian veto leading to the inability to extend the mission by the UN Security Council), further facilitated Russia's monopolisation of external relations of Abkhazia while making it more dependent on itself in terms of security and economics. On 30 April 2009, Abkhazia and South Ossetia signed agreements with Russia on the protection of their borders. These near-identical agreements included civilian and military components, Russian-funded and wholly under Russian control. This was supposed to be a temporary arrangement

until the de facto states formed their own border guards, however, the practical result of the agreements was the Russia's border was extended to the de facto border between Georgia and the two de facto states (Ambrosio & Lange 2016, 681). After the Agreements were signed in September 2008, Russia moved to build several military bases in both de facto states, including a naval base in Abkhazia (Gerrits and Bader 2016, 302). The Agreement on the military base signed on February 17, 2010 is valid for 49 years, automatically renewable for 15-year periods and allows Russia to keep 1700 troops in Abkhazia in addition to the border guards already present in Abkhazia (Toomla 2016, 61). In August, Russia and Abkhazia signed the Agreement to assist Abkhazia in its socio-economic development. This and the agreements signed in 2010, represented concrete steps towards lifting trade barriers and fostering cooperation regarding customs (Gerrits & Bader 2016, 301). These agreements had a “friendly character and a humanitarian component pointing to the close relationship between Russian and Abkhazian peoples” (Interview with an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation).¹⁶¹

In 2011, Russia increased its soft power in the entity as Russia and Abkhazia signed the Agreement on the establishment of informatory-cultural centres and the conditions governing their activities.¹⁶² Abkhazia's economic reliance on Russia also increased. In 2009, according to President Bagapsh, 99 percent of foreign direct investment originated from Russia (Gerrits and Bader 2016, 300–301), while the direct budgetary contribution of Russia to the Abkhaz budget amounted to 57% (Toomla 2016, 61) to 60% (Gerrits and Bader 2016, 302). Around 80% of all goods consumed in Abkhazia were imported from Russia

¹⁶¹ An interesting thing that came up in my interviews with Abkhazian and the few Russian officials I spoke to (Russian officials were much less interested in speaking to me compared to officials in Georgia, Abkhazia, the EU or the US for which I blame my weaker network of contacts in Moscow, but also the low state of relations between Russia and the EU), was that Abkhazians consistently focused on relations between the state of Russia and the state of Abkhazia, whereas Russians talked of relations between Russian people (*Россияне* [rossiyane], referring all citizens of the Russian Federation, not only ethnic Russians) and Abkhazian people. From this one could speculate that Abkhazians understand Russian recognition and diplomatic relations with Russia as having a more formal character, while Russians have a more informal attitude towards them. The latter seems to be confirmed by the fact that citizens of Russia do not have their passports stamped when they exit Russia and enter Abkhazia at the border on the Psou river.

¹⁶² At the same time, in 2011, a public opinion survey about the EU in Abkhazia and its role in resolution of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict, showed that Abkhaz society did not see EU as neutral (Shakryl and Kerselyan 2012, 3).

(International Crisis Group Annual Report 2010). In fact, Abkhazia imported so much from Russia, that it had a considerable trade deficit, with the value of Abkhaz imports in 2011 roughly eleven times bigger than that of its exports (Gerrits & Bader 2016, 300–301). “During the presidential election in 2009, Abkhazia's current president Khajimba expressed concerns about Russian 'colonization' (Ambrosio & Lange 2016, 677–8). Interestingly enough, Khajimba ran again in 2011 Abkhazian presidential elections after the incumbent President Sergey Bagapsh died in office. This time however, he was widely seen as a Russian-supported candidate. Khajimba lost the August 2011 elections to Alexander Ankvab of Aitaira, who won in the first round with 54.90%. During de facto presidential elections in 2011, 9000 Abkhazian passports were issued to Georgians (Kereselidze 2015, 315–6) and it would ultimately be this policy of granting passports to Gal/i Georgians, which would cause the downfall of Ankvab in 2014.

While the core objective of Russia's foreign policy has since the breakup of the Soviet Union been securing the 'Near Abroad' as its sphere of influence, since 2011 or 2012 this has become even more of a priority closely linked to Russia's increasingly authoritarian politics. The conflicts involving de facto states have become an important instrument in Russia's revisionist policy as it maintained military presence in the conflict areas, distributed Russian passports to residents of de facto states, and offered support for state-building efforts (Fischer 2016, 6). However, not everyone in Russia was happy with Putin's sponsorship of the majority non-Russian de facto states, which provoked a backlash among some Russian nationalist circles, including those who “mobilized in October 2011 around the slogan 'stop feeding the Caucasus'” (Toal 2017, 282–283).

In Abkhazia, too, Russia's exploitation of the region's resources was not without opposition, with some accusing Russia of trying to annex the territory and Russians of wanting to buy up Abkhazia's real estate. There were also disagreements between Russia and Abkhaz authorities regarding the disbursement of financial assistance (Gerrits and Bader 2016, 308) but all main political forces and politicians in Abkhazia welcome Russia's involvement, and none of them can imagine a reintegration into the Georgian state (Gerrits and

Bader 2016, 308). However, a sense of mistrust has crept into the relationship and fears of growing overdependence on Russia are increasingly present.

Domestic political changes in Russia, Georgia and Abkhazia in 2012

The year 2012 saw important political developments in Russia, Georgia, and Abkhazia. On March 4, 2012 Putin again becomes president winning 63.6% in the first round, after one mandate of Medvedev in power. From the start of the mandate, he adopted an even harder line towards the EU, trying to dissuade the ENP countries from signing association agreements with the EU (Orenstein and Kelemen 2017, 90–91). Russia's foreign policy focused towards creating the alternatives to the EU and NATO in the Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), respectively. These efforts were aimed at creating a new system of vertical relationships to challenge the ones the West had with the ENP countries. If Russia would not be treated as an equal by the US and the EU, perhaps it could achieve equality and parity in horizontal relations through creating new institutions that it could dominate. In addition, Russia focused on expanding its influence in the region through developing 'soft power' instruments including ties with Russian and Russian-speaking diaspora, and the state agency Rossotrudnichestvo (which also has offices in Abkhazia and South Ossetia), which promotes Russian culture and language, preserves historical heritage, and strengthens ties of Russians living abroad to Russia (Fischer 2016, 13). Trying to beat the West at its own game was more than just borrowing strategies and tactics, it was also about seeking status.

On October 1, 2012, Russia's hand in Georgia was strengthened when President Saakashvili's United National Movement lost to the newly formed Georgian Dream of tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili in what was regarded as free and democratic elections (Delcour & Wolczuk 2015, 464). The new Georgian government adopted an explicit and reinvigorated policy of engagement of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while being more permissive regarding other actors' interactions with the two de facto states (De Waal 2017). Russia tried to use this opportunity to counter Georgian engagement, tie Abkhazia even closer to itself, while

polarizing Georgia. The then Prime minister Ivanishvili repeatedly criticised the preceding government's strategy towards Russia, while being in turn criticized by the former president's allies regarding his seeking of relations normalization with Russia (Delcour & Wolczuk 2015, 472). The ruling coalition, the Georgian Dream, being a broad and internally diverse movement, included both visible pro-European elements as well as "more nativist, nationalist, and closer to hard-line elements in the Georgian Orthodox Church" (De Waal 2017). Despite being more lenient towards the international community's interaction with Abkhazia, it kept in place the Law on Occupied Territories and the commitment to join the EU and NATO. The newly appointed minister of reconciliation, Paata Zakareishvili, made a number of overtures to Abkhazia and South Ossetia ostensibly to bring them out of isolation through cross-border societal and economic activities and by trying to establish direct communications with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, the change in political course has produced few results (Fischer 2016, 51–53). A different development was under way in Abkhazia, where parliamentary elections in 2012 did not produce a change in power but were nevertheless a surprise, since the pro-Kremlin Raul Khajima lost the elections to Baghapsh's successor Alexander Ankvab, who was having a difficult time mastering his inherited political domain. In early 2012, less than a year after he took office, his motorcade was attacked with heavy weapons but he president survived the assassination attempt (Hale 2014, 352–353).

Russia's relations with Abkhazia during this period were marked by Abkhaz wariness of Russia. Raul Khajimba, the Russian-backed Abkhaz politician lost parliamentary elections after losing the presidential elections in 2009 and 2011. The choice of the Abkhazians not to elect the Kremlin-approved candidate probably had something to do with the fact that in 2012, Russia's financial aid made up only 22% of the Abkhaz budget (Gerrits and Bader 2016, 302), down from around 60% the year before. Abkhazian wariness was further demonstrated in the trade agreements signed with Russia in 2012, with the Abkhazian version of the agreement markedly more restrictive regarding the free-trade regime compared to the South Ossetian version. This reflected Abkhazian economic insecurities but also a desire of the officials to preserve the customs revenues coming from Russian imports (Ambrosio & Lange 2016, 681).

The calm before the storm

The first half of 2013 was a strangely uneventful time for Russian foreign policy and the Russian-Abkhaz relations, with by far the most important event being the unveiling in February 2013 of the New Russian Foreign Policy Concept, which attacked 'shifting sovereignty principles' and stated that Russia will oppose any revision of universally recognised norms of international law, such as state sovereignty and territorial integrity, and that their subjective interpretation is particularly dangerous to international peace, law and order (Deyermond 2016, 964) – a pronouncement strangely at odds with Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. An opinion poll by Kommersant in 2013, showed that the sense of insecurity and the siege mentality was not only present among Russian decision-makers, but also shared by the wider population. The opinion poll showed a strong increase in the number of people who believed that Russia is faced with enemies – from only 13% in 1989 to 41% in 1994 and 65% in 1999 to an eventual 78% in 2013 (Hansen 2016, 359).

2013 saw political instability in Ukraine and Abkhazia that would lead to regime changes the following year, to the War in Ukraine, the seizure of Crimea and a complete breakdown of Russia's relations with the West. Trouble in Abkhazia started in early 2013 when Ankvab's government stated it would double electricity rates. This decision sparked protests, which eventually forced the government to compromise" (Hale 2014, 352). The opposition raising concerns about the process of passportisation of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia, and the threat of losing sovereignty and territorial integrity. In late 2013 the Parliament adopted a resolution to carry out a sweeping probe into passport offices of the interior ministry regarding the distribution of passports to Georgians in Abkhazia and called for the annulment of illegally issued passports (Hale 2014, 352). September 2013 also saw Armenia's political u-turn, when it decided not to proceed with a recently-finalised association and free trade agreement with the EU, opting instead to join a customs union led by Russia. Similar to how successfully applying pressure on Adjara made Saakashvili believe he could do the same with South Ossetia, the fact that Russian pressure on Armenia changed its decision probably influenced Putin's decision to apply pressure on Ukraine to

give up its EU course in the following year, a decision that would ultimately lead to war.

Georgia saw further internal developments: Giorgi Margvelashvili of the Georgian Dream won the presidential elections (Saakashvili was constitutionally barred from running for a third consecutive term and left Georgia after the end of his office), and Bidzina Ivanishvili stepped down as prime minister and was replaced by his hand-picked successor, Irakli Garibashvili. However, these changes kept Georgia on its charted political course, with the Parliament approving the bilateral agreement on the non-use of force in Abkhazia and Ossetia (Interview with Paata Zakareishvili). Russia maintained a heavy military presence in Abkhazia in 2013, with about 3500 military and 1500 border guard troops (ICG 2013, 3), while construction was going on new military facilities (Gerrits & Bader 2016, 302). Despite the large Russian footprint in Abkhazia, Pacher's (2017, 4) analysis of diplomatic notes sent by Abkhazia, shows that only a fourth of the diplomatic resources of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are dedicated to the management of the relationship with Russia, with the rest aimed towards other de facto states, Pacific islands and Latin American countries that have recognised them, even in some cases towards recognised countries that have not recognised them (*ibid.*). This points to the fact that the multi-vector foreign policy or at the willingness to pursue it, existed in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but fundamental differences were also observed in October 2013, when South Ossetia, an essentially irredentist entity, and the Russian Republic of North Ossetia-Alania signed agreements bringing the former close to the integration with the latter. In contrast with South Ossetia, Abkhazia had no desire to become part of Russia as the Abkhazian national project is based on the idea of an independent state for the Abkhaz people (Egorova & Babin 2015, 90–91).

In early 2014, several opposition figures, including Raul Khajimba, Sergei Shamba, and Beslan Butba demanded the resignation of the Ankvab government, criticizing it for the high levels of unemployment (up to 70 percent according to some reports) and accusing it of misspending Russian aid on pet projects like the new stadium in Sukhum/i (Hale 2014, 353). A wave of protests shook Sukhum/i in May (Kopeček et al. 2016, 94), with Vladislav Surkov,

President Putin's personal adviser on relationships with Abkhazia and South Ossetia flying to Sukhum/i to conduct talks with the conflicting sides (Fischer 2016, 56). Abkhazian Parliament voted for the resignation of President Ankvab and after Russian mediation in early June 2014 Ankvab agreed to step down, making way for early presidential elections (Hale 2014, 353). Clamadieu (2018) attributes Ankvab's resignation to a controversy over Abkhazian identity: "Identity is a subject of major controversy at the political level. For instance, in 2014, the Abkhazian President, Alexander Ankvab, had to resign because he was considered "not Abkhaz enough" by his political opponents due to his liberal policy towards Georgian inhabitants of Abkhazia" (Clamadieu 2018). Raul Khadjimba was finally elected president in August 2014, in the first round with 50.57 % of the votes. However, the election was not fair and free for the first time since 2004. Most Georgians living in the Gal/i district were not able to vote, while polling stations in Russia and Turkey enabled the vote of the members of Abkhazian Diaspora (Kopeček et al. 2016, 94). As Dembinska (2019, 10) argues, "Khadjimba wanted to deny a voice to a large section of the community that was unlikely to vote for him." The summer of 2014 didn't just bring political change in Abkhazia with the election of a more pro-Russian politician, but also – and often overseen and underreported – an unprecedented civil society mobilisation and cross-party opposition to the contract that would allow Rosneft to prospect for and drill oil (to the alleged detriment of environment) in Abkhazia (Khalilova et al. 2016, 3022). This points to the fact that with a change in power, the Abkhaz civil society had the ability to organize and defend what it considered to be a matter of vital national interest, which it saw could be threatened by a pro-Russian President. It could also be read as a signal to Russia that despite the regime change, it would not allow Abkhazia to capitulate to Russian interests.

The second half of 2014 in Russian-Abkhaz relations was marked by greater willingness of the newly elected Abkhazian President to seek closer ties with Russia. The latter did not consider political change in Abkhazia necessary, but did find it useful as Khadjimba was an ally and weaker than Ankvab. Soon after his election, he expressed his willingness to conclude a new treaty (Fischer 2016, 56). He moved quickly to sign two wide-ranging agreements – the 'Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support', and the 'Agreement on Strategic

Partnership and Alliance' in September and November, respectively. Although Russia and Abkhazia signed over 70 agreements, the two signed after Khajimba became president, established a new baseline for Russian-Abkhaz relations (Ambrosio & Lange 2016, 680). The content of the agreements tells the story of Abkhazia's growing dependence on Russia, but the process of their negotiation shows a story of Abkhazia's successful resistance to what it deemed unacceptable provisions. Therefore, I first analyse the process and then turn to the assessment of the content and how it impacts the margin of Abkhazia's independence.

The initiative to conclude a treaty came from Russian and Abkhaz actors, who suggested that Abkhazia could become 'associated' with Russia, a move that could be interpreted as a "symmetrical response" to the EU-Georgian Association Agreement (Fischer 2016, 54), showing the desire of both parties to find ontological security in vertical relationships that mimic the ones between the EU and the ENP countries. In mid-October 2014, Russia handed the draft of the Treaty on Alliance and Integration between Russia and Abkhazia to Abkhazian authorities. Several proposed provisions concerning the creation of a joint social, economic, security, defence and foreign policy areas, went against the Abkhaz claim for sovereignty (Fischer 2016, 56). As Ambrosio & Lange (2016, 684) have noted, even the title phrase "Alliance and Integration", implied future incorporation of Abkhazia into Russia, which was deemed unacceptable. This draft was then leaked to the Abkhaz press, causing a scandal among Abkhazian policy-makers and the civil society. Zedgenidze (2014) has speculated that most probably the Abkhazian authorities themselves released the early draft agreement to provoke a public outcry, which would give them leverage for seeking a revision. The reaction of the Abkhaz government was to present its own draft of the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership that differed markedly from the earlier Russian draft (Fischer 2016, 56). Most importantly, the word 'integration' was dropped in the next drafts (Ambrosio & Lange 2016, 684) and the treaty signed on 24 November 2014 stipulated "close coordination" between Russian and Abkhaz military, border and police structures (Remler et al. 2016, 16).

It is not possible to cover here in detail all the subject areas of the treaties, so I focus instead on the question how these treaties impact Abkhazia's margin of (in)dependence.¹⁶³ Gerrits & Bader's (2016, 302) point out that these treaties anticipate more integration, providing the basis for a "coordinated foreign policy" and a "single space of defence and security" between Russia and the de facto states. They also include clauses regarding the simplification of procedures leading to Russian citizenship for citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and promise an increase of average salaries towards the level of the Southern Federal District of Russia (Gerrits & Bader 2016, 302). Kereselidze (2015, 315) called the treaties part of Russia's 'embrace policy,' while Egorova & Babin (2015, 94–95) have shown that it is not a mutual embrace since there are significant fears on the Abkhaz side that Russia intends to monopolize every sector and an anxiety of getting 'swallowed' by Russia. Fischer (2016, 18) argues that "With the economic and military agreements concluded since 2014 the threshold to de facto annexation has now been reached", but also notes that Russia "has failed to enforce its interests in Abkhazia time and again, finding itself "forced to operate more cautiously in Abkhazia, for instance during the political crisis in May/June 2014 and the debate over the agreement on alliance and strategic partnership." Berg & Vits (2018, 8) go the furthest by claiming that "with the signing of the treaty with ABH on alliance and strategic partnership (in late 2014) and the treaty on alliance and integration with SO (at the beginning of 2015), Russia effectively turned these entities into its geopolitical pawns." It is not surprising to see a re-emergence of discourses that diminish the agency of Abkhazia (but also other post-Soviet de facto states) in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea.¹⁶⁴ Ambrosio & Lange (2016, 674) in their careful analysis of the two Russian-Abkhaz agreements, have stated that such a "perspective understates their separate state- and nation-building processes, their capacity for independent agency, and their ability to garner concessions from Russia during

¹⁶³ For a closer analysis of the treaties themselves, on which I draw, see Ambrosio & Lange (2016), Comai (2018) and Gerrits & Bader (2016).

¹⁶⁴ These discursive practices have dominated the scholarly discourse on Eurasian de facto states since they first appeared in 1990s and have diminished throughout the years, although some scholars, such as Florea (2014) still referred to governments of *all* unrecognised states as to 'rebels' or 'separatist rebels', making practically no distinction between the Polisario Front in Western Sahara and the Government of Taiwan. However, many scholars disagreed with reducing Abkhazia to a geopolitical pawn or a puppet state.

bilateral negotiations.” Perhaps Abkhazia’s willingness and capacity to keep Russia at an arm’s length is again best understood in comparison with South Ossetia; Abkhazia is less dependent on Russia and goes to greater lengths to protect its separate identity and institutions than South Ossetia. Abkhazia asked for and received greater autonomy than South Ossetia, which is particularly evident in the 2014 and 2015 agreements (Ambrosio & Lange 2016, 682–3). De Waal (2014) agrees with this assessment, noting that commentators have mostly ignored to what extent the Abkhaz side was able to change or even completely remove parts of the draft treaty. They changed 'integration' to 'strategic partnership', foreign policy was no longer 'coordinated' but rather 'agreed'. Russians were not given the possibility to acquire Abkhaz citizenship as the first draft stipulated and the Abkhaz kept their own military structures.

My assessment of the treaties' impact on the margin of Abkhazia's dependence on Russia is that they have further increased it, but it still does not amount to 'de facto annexation' or Abkhazia becoming a 'puppet state'.¹⁶⁵ A series of disagreements between Abkhazia and Russia continue to exist, with Abkhazian leadership and civil society showing both willingness and capacity to push back when challenged on issues like property ownership by Russians in Abkhazia, oil reserves exploitation off the coast of Abkhazia, the status of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church (regarded by the Russian Orthodox Church as part of Georgian Orthodox Church), and the exact demarcation of the Russian-Abkhaz border (Fischer 2016, 54). Abkhazian foreign policy in the period 2012-2014 has definitely been less multi-vector, but 2014 did see a push towards establishing international connections especially in the cultural sphere, notably when Abkhazia participated in the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (CONIFA) World Cup held June 2014 in Sweden and hosted the next tournament in 2016 in Sukhum/i (Smith 2018, 186). Furthermore, between 2014 and 2016, “Abkhazia accelerated its foreign affairs strategy and began a socio-cultural outreach program aimed at seeking external legitimacy in the international system” (Smith 2018, 185), which

¹⁶⁵ See Pegg (2002); Caspersen (2008); and Berg and Kamilova (2012) for discussions on the dependence of de facto states and criteria for distinguishing them from puppet states. What is common to all three accounts is that they do not reject patron state involvement or downplay de facto state’s dependence on it but neither do they overplay it.

suggests that Abkhazia has not retreated from addressing the international audience to focusing solely on the bilateral relationship with Russia. Rather than changing interlocutors it has effectively reduced its ambitions and is no longer actively trying to obtain new recognitions but focuses on developing economic and cultural ties that can pass under the radar, while still providing the necessary routinized ways of interaction to fulfil Abkhazia's ontological security needs. However, and this has been largely overlooked, the agreements might present problems for the maintenance of distinct Abkhaz identity. Most citizens of Abkhazia are also Russian citizens and the agreements contain the provision that the schools in South Ossetia and Abkhazia should “encourage the study of the Russian language” (Ambrosio & Lange 2016, 680). Honour and ontological security depend on well-defined communities with clear-cut identities and blending identities might defuse these cultural self-defence mechanisms for maintaining independence, weakening the resolve of the Abkhaz leadership and civil society to resist Russian pressure and influence.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analyzed Russian-Abkhaz relations in the context of wider geopolitical considerations (including Russia's relations with the West, Georgia and the situation in the North Caucasus). I have paid special attention to ontological (in)security, including how Russia's conceptions of status and honour have shaped Russia's foreign policy in general and Russia's relations with Abkhazia between 1991 and 2014 in particular. Drawing on Tsygankov's honour-centered analysis of Russian foreign policy, Morozov's referencing of ontological security and his analytical push beyond great-power politics, I have followed Russia's enduring interests and fluctuating political relations through process-tracing.

I began by tracing the deep roots of Russia's sense of ontological security to its historically bivalent relationship with the West characterized by push-pull dynamics of seeking ontological security through both othering and maintaining relationship routines. I partially identified historical grounds for understanding of Russian foreign policy in Chapter 2, paying particular attention to the 'geopolitical

catastrophe of 1990s'. This is a historically 'thick' period, with complex domestic and international dimensions that form the habitus of foreign policy thinking of Russian foreign policy practitioners today. Of particular interest for my project in this time period are Russia's relations with the West, but also with Georgia and its domestic situation in the North Caucasus. Importantly, Russia was largely supportive of Georgia through 1990s and Abkhazia remained effectively without a patron state, and under a Russian embargo until the 2000s. I then charted the course of Russian-Abkhaz relations through Russia's fluctuating relations with Georgia and the West during Putin's first two presidential mandates, focusing on the role of honour in Russia's shift from a country hoping to regain its great power status through cooperation with the West to a revisionist one bent on asserting its power when it considered its interests violated. Russian-Abkhaz relationship – often seen as either static (full dependence) or linear (ever-growing dependence) – has also fluctuated with time, not only as a result of Russia's relations with other actors, but also due to local dynamics, including the willingness and capacity of Abkhazian political elites and civil society to push back when they saw Abkhazia's core interests being threatened. Russia has definitely consolidated its hegemony over Abkhazia, but it does not amount to domination of its domestic politics or preclude its foreign policy. However, the ever-closer ties and continuing international isolation of Abkhazia has a potential of defusing Abkhazia's ontological security through the blending of identities. Rather than territorial and political incorporation into the Russian Federation as in the case of Crimea, the threat is cultural absorption into the '*Ruskiy mir*', the quasi-imperial cultural space of the Russian world. Arguably, Abkhazia's best bet to maintain its ontological security and preserve its identity is through balancing Russian influence by interacting with other international actors. As part of that, I look specifically at Abkhazia's relations with the EU and the US in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: EU and US engagement with Abkhazia

Estragon: “Nothing to be done.”
Vladimir: “I’m beginning to come round to that opinion.”
– Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot* (1952)

Introduction

After having analysed Abkhazia’s foreign policy in Chapter 4 and its relations with Russia in Chapter 5, I now turn to the analysis of Abkhazia’s relations with the EU and the US.¹⁶⁶ As in the previous chapters, this chapter is focused on and structured by my research question regarding the relationship between interpretations of non-recognition and foreign policy behaviour (Chapter 1). In operationalization of my concepts (Chapter 3), I have tied ontological security to status (recognition, partial recognition or non-recognition) on the one hand, and interaction (from isolation to extensive and intensive engagement) on the other. States try to maintain a consistent foreign policy in which actions correspond to words. Defining an entity as a *de facto* state or as an occupied territory therefore has important implications for the foreign policy behaviour of both the *de facto* state and the actors that interact with it.

To follow the aim above, I look at how the interpretation of status affected EU and US policymakers’ engagement with Abkhazia. I do this through three comparisons. First, as the EU is not a unitary actor to the extent that the US is, I compare how different EU institutions and members states have interpreted

¹⁶⁶ As the title of the chapter suggests, I primarily examine the EU and the US side of the interaction – their engagement with Abkhazia. This is not to deny or diminish Abkhazia’s agency and the ability and willingness to play a pro-active role in these engagements (as it does and which I show in the section on Abkhaz lobbying in the US). The reader looking for a more-in-depth analysis of the Abkhaz side of its external relations, should refer to Chapter 4, where Abkhazia’s foreign policy is discussed in more detail.

Abkhazia's status and how this has impacted EU's engagement strategy. Second, I look at the engagement throughout time, comparing the 1999–2008 and 2009–2014 periods and by doing that compare EU and US strategies of engagement with Abkhazia. Building on these comparisons, a comparison between engagement of Abkhazia by the EU and the US, by Georgia, and by Russia will be made in the next and last chapter, Chapter 7. As in the previous chapters, my point of departure is that engagement with Abkhazia is shaped by external (geopolitical considerations) and internal factors (ontological security and domestic politics). I argue that the US engagement with Abkhazia was shaped more by the first, specifically by interests tied to energy and security in the Caucasus. In contrast, the EU engagement with Abkhazia was shaped more by the latter, specifically by interests tied to conflict resolution and norms promotion as part of its agenda of stabilizing and democratizing its Eastern Neighbourhood.

I have so far applied the perspective of ontological security to both the analysis of Abkhazian and Russian foreign policies. In both cases the use of the perspective was justified on cultural grounds as the national identity of both relies on (premodern) conceptions of honour (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), that pushes them to seek recognition as a nation and a state by Abkhazia and as a great power by Russia. I do not explicitly employ this perspective in analysing the foreign policy of the EU and the US for two reasons. The first one is that I chose to focus on interests, inter-institutional dynamics between actors, and engagement strategies as a more important explanatory factor instead. The second reason is that the EU's self-perception as a great power, a successful mediator and a normative actor, while at stake in its engagement of Abkhazia, in no way reaches existential dimensions. This is even more true in the case of the US. Geography plays an important role here. For Russia, Abkhazia is a former imperial subject with a shared history, a neighbour and an ally, with a Russian ethnic minority and a majority of Russian citizens. For the EU, Abkhazia has only recently become part of its neighbourhood, Abkhazia nor Georgia border any EU member state, there are few historical commonalities and links between their populations. Finally, the US is the farthest from Abkhazia than EU and Russia in geographical as well as historical, cultural, political, and symbolic sense.

Consequently, its stake in the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is smaller than that of either Russia or the EU.

In the first part of the chapter, I start by looking at EU and US foreign policy in the Caucasus by identifying their overarching interests. I then consider the different actors involved and the formats and levels at which engagement happens. In the second part of the chapter, I analyse EU and US engagement with Abkhazia through process-tracing, comparing the 1999–2008 period with the 2009–2014 period. I do so to answer the question to what extent were the recognition of Kosovo, the August War between Russia and Georgia, and the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and Ossetia that represent the separation between these two periods, also watershed events in EU and US engagement of Abkhazia.

EU's foreign policy towards Abkhazia

The EU has no declared foreign policy towards Abkhazia.¹⁶⁷ It recognises and supports the territorial integrity of Georgia with Abkhazia as its constituent part, yet it engages with Abkhazia based on 'engagement without recognition', which is more than a concept and less than a policy. For Georgia and much of the international community, including the EU and the US, Abkhazia seems like a phantom limb, which does not exist but continues to produce pain or at least occasional soreness. Instead of further dwelling on definitions of foreign policy and interpreting whether EU has one towards Abkhazia and vice versa, I propose to start my constructivist analysis – perhaps paradoxically and hence appropriate to the subject – by looking at interests. I then go beyond the Realist paradigm by peeking into the Realist black box to identify the multiplicity behind the actor we call 'the EU', and the plurality of perceptions and policies before bringing it all back and identifying 'unity in diversity' in a dialectical synthesis and a discussion on strategies.

¹⁶⁷ This may seem in direct opposition to the sub-title of this chapter, but it is not. In EU's case the inexistence of a policy is a policy of inexistence, the non-recognition of a policy towards Abkhazia turns out to be the policy of non-recognition. EU's policy towards Abkhazia is conspicuous in its absence.

Interests: conflict resolution and normative influence

I argue that EU's interests in Abkhazia are shaped by EU's wider interests in peace, stability, democracy and human rights promotion in the Caucasus as part of its Eastern neighbourhood. Oskanian (2013, 142) notes that the South Caucasus is important to the EU because of “strategic material interests” and “as a source of and transit corridor for Caspian hydrocarbons”, especially to reduce its energy dependence on Russia (Baran, 2007). As the South Caucasus is a potential area of enlargement, the EU also has an interest in furthering the stability of the region by diffusing ‘European’ values” (Oskanian 2013, 143). Interests shape the roles states play and the EU primarily wears the hats of mediator assisting conflict resolution and of the role model exerting normative influence. However, despite relatively strong interests in the region, Georgia (as the rest of the South Caucasus and Central Asia) had the weakest relations with the EU among all EU’s neighbours (Tocci 2007, 141). Although the EU attention and aid to the Balkans (for instance) still dwarfs that accorded to Georgia, this has changed in recent years and especially after the 2008 War, which drew more attention and assistance to Georgia and – as part of that – to Abkhazia). The EU’s role in the South Caucasus and Georgia has also grown as the role of the US has declined.

The Geneva International Discussions

EU's role as a mediator in the South Caucasus is most prominent in the Geneva International Discussions (GID),¹⁶⁸ of which it is a co-chair alongside the OSCE and the UN.¹⁶⁹ At the same time, the GID serves as the main platform for interaction between the EU officials and the Abkhaz.

In 1994, the ‘Group of Friends for Georgia’ was created under the auspices of the UN Secretary General, including the US, Germany, the UK, Russia, and France.

¹⁶⁸ A distinction must be made between the ‘Geneva process’ and the GID (also referred to as ‘Geneva talks’ or ‘Geneva negotiations’). The former started in 1993 after the Georgian-Abkhaz war, while the latter began after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 (Tekushev et al. 2013, 42).

¹⁶⁹ In comparison, it plays a relatively small role in conflict resolution between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which is conducted by the OSCE Mins Group that includes France, Russia and the United States as the co-chairs.

In 1997, the UN appointed a Special Representative to the Secretary General with a mandate to coordinate conflict resolution efforts under the Geneva process while the UNOMIG started its operation. The Geneva process was managed by the Coordination Council with three working groups on: non-violence, the return of the IDPs, and on economic issues (Tekushev et al. 2013, 42). With the establishment of GID, the EU took over greater responsibility as a “conflict manager” and “security actor” in the South Caucasus (Freire & Simão 2013, 470). According to Fean (2009, 6), the EU previously avoided playing a role in the negotiations. It supported the peace process by providing funds but – “in order not to duplicate the activities” of the OSCE and the UN – “refused to engage in the process itself.” The first round of GID took place on 14 October 2008 (Freire & Simão 2013, 470) and immediately the dispute of who was to be present at the negotiations appeared. Georgia considered the dispute to be between Russia and itself, while Russia demanded the inclusion of delegations from Abkhazia and South Ossetia – states that it now recognised as independent – and that also wanted to participate. The Russian, South Ossetian and Abkhazian delegations threatened to walk out of the negotiations and the meeting was rescheduled to November (Hille 2010, 201–2). In the second round, the mediators and the conflict parties managed to reach a compromise. At Russian insistence, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were also included in the format (Mikhelidze 2010, 10) but on Georgia’s insistence only in their personal capacity and not as official state representatives or representatives of the local population in Abkhazia (Coppieters 2018, 8–9). Because of the difference in status and because groups met informally in working groups (Hille 2010, 202), the positions of Russia and Georgia appeared stronger than the positions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the negotiations became asymmetrical (Companjen 2010, 203).

During the subsequent round in December no progress occurred (Hille 2010, 202) but in the February 2009 session, both sides came to an agreement to establish an “incident prevention and response mechanism” aimed at defusing tensions (Nichol 2009, 11). The latter rounds of GID, however, again achieved very limited progress. One positive example was cooperation on the historic archives that included a productive discussion on cultural heritage protection in the 32nd and

33rd round (Interview with Carlo Natale¹⁷⁰). Despite the highly politicized discussions, which often stalled, the informal occasions for interaction seemed to have contributed to trust-building, especially the separate informal meetings over lunch between Georgians, Abkhazians and South Ossetians in which the participants speak in Russian and that “have created a good – even cordial – atmosphere among the participants that have met many times now” (Interview with Carlo Natale).

Despite EU’s increased role in the conflict resolution process, the GID have not achieved the desired outcome. According to Mikhelidze (2009, 40–41), the new format came too late to meaningfully change the outcome of the conflict and the integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Russia – although unlikely to happen in the short term – is more plausible in the long run. Grono (2010, 28) adds that participants and co-chairs in the GID – including the EU – “seem to operate in the power-based, not the interest-based paradigm”, leaving the EU with little leverage to conduct effective mediation. Bouris and Schumacher (2017, 162) note that GID have made little progress but all sides accept them as an important formal channel for the exchange of views (Bouris & Schumacher 2017, 162). GID has become an end in-itself; a welcome communication platform but not much more than that (Smolnik 2012, 3).

Some have put the blame for lack of progress in GID on Abkhazia. Malyarenko & Wolff (2012, 188) note that one year after the start of GID, Sergei Bagapsh stated that “the independence of Abkhazia not only is assured, but that we will thrive politically and economically ... [and that] it is only a matter of time before we are recognised by most countries of the world” (*ibid.*). This points to the fact that at that time the self-confidence (if not arrogance) of Abkhazian foreign policy makers was high as they were not really interested in GID and the compromises the negotiations would require. Others have chastised the EU for the lack of robust policy positions that would enable it to play a greater role and for allowing “its

¹⁷⁰ Carlo Natale was the Deputy Head of EU Delegation to Georgia when this interview was carried out.

internal divisions to undermine the leverage it could bring as mediator” (Grono 2010, 7).

EU as a normative actor

The other interest the EU has in the region, including its engagement with Abkhazia, is that of normative influence; promoting positive political, social and economic transformations. While the EU has, despite the lack of progress in negotiations, succeeded in playing a more prominent conflict resolution role in the region generally and in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict specifically, it has not been as successful in playing the role of a credible normative actor.

There seems to be a disconnect between the self-perception of the EU as a normative actor, acting normatively (employing the language of peace, democracy, and human rights), and having a normative impact to the extent that there is doubt whether the democratic peace doctrine extends beyond the borders of the EU (Pace 2007, 1059). As Smolnik (2012, 5) argues, the EU policy towards the conflicts “has been more declarative than substantial, more reactive than proactive,” with ‘engagement without recognition’ policy being a case in point. The strategy has been strong on the latter but less on the former and according to some (Kvarchelia, 2011, 33) it is tied exclusively to conflict resolution, increasing distrust of the EU among Abkhazians. However, for all the shortcomings of the EU’s approach, the bias against secession is understandable and not unique to the EU. In fact, the OSCE – also a co-chair in the GID – has also been accused of the same (Tocci 2006, 72).

While it was an achievement for the EU to take up responsibility and act as the mediator, it has largely failed to be perceived as a neutral mediator, especially by Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which has affected its normative impact, given the lack of information about the EU available to the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Stewart in Whitman 2011, 77). Assessments of EU’s image in the region vary. Smolnik (2012, 5) claims that despite the local actors mostly viewing the EU as less biased than the US or Russia, the EU failed to capitalise on this positive image. Dobrescu and Schumacher (2018, 9) on the contrary, state that negative perceptions of the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are also due to

implicit comparisons with Russia, whose leadership enjoys greater trust among the citizens of Abkhazia than that of their own leaders. According to Vasilyan (2014, 397), the EU is not very inclusive and consequently lacks legitimacy in the de facto states. Garb (2009, 240) reports that not all EU and US officials are viewed negatively in Abkhazia, and Schiffers (2015, 31) adds that there may be more appreciation of the EU among the civil society activists, who have more contact with and have benefitted from the EU.

Low level of involvement compared to some other regions – the EU spends much more on assistance to the Balkans, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East than on Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tocci 2007, 175) – and a focus on narrow agendas by the de facto states caused the EU to play a relatively small role. This was further exacerbated by unclear perceptions regarding its own interests regarding “security, power and material gain” in the region (Whitman & Wolff 2010, 100). An additional problem is that the Abkhaz and the Ossetians reject EU’s role as a mediator due to their balance-of-power view in which the EU and the US are perceived as being on Georgia's side (Tocci 2007, 145). Another reason for EU’s weak engagement related to the balance-of-power view of Abkhazia, is competition from Russia, causing ‘Europeanisation’ to lose traction as a way of positively influencing conflict dynamics (Melvin & Prelz Oltramonti 2015, 2).

As described above, the EU's conflict resolution and normative engagement with Abkhazia encounters many challenges and its interests in the conflict may be lower than in some other regions. Despite that, EU’s interests remain significant and broad. Although I am focusing on EU's roles of the mediator and the normative actor, it must be acknowledged that the EU is also an economic (interested in economic cooperation with its neighbours), and geopolitical (countering the influences of Russia, China, and others in the region, and ensuring access to resources) player.

The EU’s interests in conflict resolution and normative influence in the Caucasus influence its perception of Abkhazia, while at the same way influencing Abkhazia’s perception of the EU. The EU’s involvement as a co-chair in GID enabled more interaction, but at the same time it remained limited to the format

of the GID and the goal of conflict resolution, which in its final instance for Georgia and EU, cannot mean anything else but Georgia's restoration of territorial integrity and Abkhazia's reincorporation into Georgia. Abkhazia's behaviour in the early rounds of GID seems to be disingenuous as they expected that further recognitions will keep coming, resulting in Abkhazia being widely recognised internationally and making the conflict-resolution moot. It is likely that the EU's bias against secession and support for Georgia's territorial integrity made their participation even more apathetic. While this account gives an insight into how the interpretation of status affected EU's engagement with Abkhazia, it needs to be explored further in terms of segregating our analysis by different EU institutions, strategies, and finally chronologically.

Actors: Institutions and member states' perceptions of status

Complicating the already paradoxical foreign policy situation of the EU described above, is the fact that the EU is a *sui generis* actor – something between an international organisation and a confederation of states. As a result, its interactions with the de facto states are complex and multi-faceted.

Member states: unity in non-recognition, diversity in engagement?

The motto of the EU is "*In varietate concordia*" or "Unity in diversity" and each of its 28 (at the time of writing in November 2019) member states has its own views on recognition of states and engagement of non-recognised states. For instance, Germany is very reluctant to issue visas to Abkhazians whose Russian passport was issued in Sukhum/i, while Italy and the UK are less strict in this respect. What explains this variance among the EU member states?

Several factors influence EU member states' attitudes towards de facto states. Size and influence are important factors in whether engagement with Abkhazia even appears on a member state's radar and agenda. Only some members possess an in-depth understanding of all the levels of conflict dynamics, with most focusing on the relations between Georgia and Russia and few have a firm grasp

of 'local' dimensions, including the Georgian-Abkhaz one (Grono 2010, 16–17). Larger states with more resources and a better staffed MFA are more likely to be familiar with the situation and to have a standpoint. Bigger and more influential states like France and Germany find it more difficult to shirk responsibility than Slovakia and Greece. These are also more often countries that the Abkhaz want to travel to or establish contacts with, forcing them to take a position. However, size is not everything and smaller countries with NGOs active in de facto states can take an interest in Abkhazia. Among countries that have funded civil society peacebuilding and conflict transformation projects in Abkhazia, mentioned by Grono (2010, 16–17), are the relatively small Denmark and the relatively influential UK and Germany alike.

Geographical location is another important factor. While the situation in the South Caucasus isn't much of a priority for Portugal and Ireland, Bulgaria and Romania – both with coasts on the Black Sea – are much more interested in the stability and security of the wider Black Sea region. As Fischer (2009, 338) notes, since their accession into the EU in 2007, the Union's interests in the region "have become more explicit."

Relations with Russia also importantly affect member states' positions on the issue. Sharp critics of Russia, like the Baltic states, Poland, Sweden (Bouris & Schumacher 2017, 162) to a degree and in some cases the Czech Republic and Finland (Grono 2010, 16) tend to view Abkhazia more as a Russian puppet and find it less acceptable to engage with it. According to Mikhelidze (2009, 38), one group of member states – which includes the Baltic states, the UK, and the eastern members – advocates for "soft containment", with another group – that includes France and Germany – calls for engagement.

Finally, the presence of separatism within the territory of a member state is another factor that may influence engagement. Spain and Romania, for example, both have large ethnic minorities and have refused to recognise Kosovo, clearly favouring the status quo and the principle of territorial integrity.¹⁷¹ The separatist

¹⁷¹ In relation to this, Coppieters (2018, 1–2) makes an important distinction between the policies of 'engagement without recognition' and 'non-recognition and engagement'. The first refers to a policy where the EU is united on engagement but divided on recognition, while the second refers

problems in some EU members and the crisis in Catalonia in 2017 made it difficult for the EU to advocate for stronger regional autonomy or even for members to accept any regional autonomy at all (Lambert 2008, 117).

EU institutions: one voice, many tones?

In addition to the divisions among member states, each EU institution has a slightly different view of and approach to engagement with Abkhazia. While they all subscribe to one policy and proclaim support for Georgia's territorial integrity with one voice, it is possible to distinguish between different tones in their pronouncements and different nuances in their narratives. Looking at the intra-EU divisions in relation to contested statehood and how they affect EU consistency (Papadimitriou & Petrov 2012) is important for understanding EU foreign policy behaviour, including its engagement with Abkhazia.

Coppiters (2018, 2) addresses the use of concepts, including 'statehood', 'de facto authorities', and 'occupation' by different EU institutions, finding that the EC, the EP, the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU, formerly European Court of Justice) and the European Court of Auditors each take a different approach and use their own terminology. In the next passage, I look at some of the main EU institutions and discuss their views on and engagement with Abkhazia.

European Parliament, Council of the EU, and the European Commission

There are differences that cut across the big trio of EU institutions. The European Parliament (EP) itself is internally divided in MEPs who sit in political groups representing different political ideologies and not their countries of origin (although in practice they often also do that). The Council of the European Union (not to be confused with the European Council and the Council of Europe) functions as the second house of EU's bicameral system. Involved in drafting and passing legislation in a complicated process with the EP, it is itself composed of national governments of EU member states and divided according to their

to a policy where the EU is united on the fact that "the legal status should be withheld" but where engagement is possible.

interests. The European Commission (EC) is the most unitary actor of the three, but its foreign policy has been institutionally fragmented with the establishment of the separate European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2010.

The EP's impact is relatively small, although groups of MEPs have focused more on certain aspects of conflict resolution and the EU's role in mediating them (Akçakoca et al. 2009, 34). A 'goodwill visit' to Sukhum/i in 2003 was even conducted by invitation from the Georgian government, although logistics in Abkhazia were arranged by the UN, which acted as a broker. According to one EP official, the conversations with de facto authorities in Sukhum/i were "were very open and very constructive. They wanted to discuss cooperation with the EU and asked for more EU presence" (Interview with Paolo Bergamaschi¹⁷²). Abkhazians even came to the EP on the invitation of some MEPs who have a right to invite anyone they wish. These meetings were, however, informal (Interview with Paolo Bergamaschi). According to Bouris and Fernandez-Molina (2018, 11), the EP's role has always been 'interesting' within the EU institutional framework in relation to de facto states due to its "open nature" and more flexible rules that enable formal and informal events to be organized with de facto states authorities invited alongside EU officials. This "parliamentary diplomacy" enables and normalizes engagement with de facto states while at the same time avoiding crossing red lines regarding recognition. Because of that, the EP has been the institution of choice for Palestinians and Sahrawis looking to approach the EU. When it comes to expressing commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity, the Council and the Commission use weaker language, avoiding condemning "Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" (Coppieters 2018, 12). In conflict resolution, the Council's role has traditionally been more political (actively mediating or facilitating negotiations between conflict parties, for instance) but it has also been less clear in defining what its mandate is in this respect and what concrete aims it wants to pursue (Akçakoca et al. 2009, 34). The previously mentioned divisions among member states are reflected in the Council, meaning that the institution often has difficulties in finding a common language. This is mostly done by looking for the lowest common denominator and avoiding

¹⁷² Paolo Bergamaschi was the Political Adviser on South Caucasus for the Greens in the European Parliament when this interview was carried out.

wordings that member states oppose, including the concept of 'occupation'. The Council avoids the concept of 'occupation' to maintain "the question of Georgia's territorial integrity at the negotiating table" (Coppieters 2018, 15–16). Given that fact, it is not surprising that the Council does least engagement with Abkhazia among the big trio of EU institutions.

The EC is most involved in engagement with Abkhazia and its efforts come closest to an actual, systematic policy. The foreign policy of the EC is mostly carried out by the Directorate-General for External Relations and previously by the EU Delegations on the ground (Akçakoca et al. 2009, 34) now part of the EEAS. For more than a decade, the EC has been one of the largest international donors in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, second only to Russia (Bouris & Schumacher 2017, 167) and has adopted a thoroughly practical approach in the conflict-affected areas through supporting predominantly humanitarian and developmental activities (Grono 2010, 18). Before it fell under the mandate of the EEAS, the Commission's engagement was conducted by the EU Delegation to Georgia using the Instrument for Stability, which funds activities of NGOs implemented locally (Grono 2010, 18). In this context, it is worth mentioning Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism (COBERM) a joint EU/UNDP program that in 2010-2015 provided support for 130 civil society initiatives in the fields of farming, healthcare, culture, youth work, journalism, research, and women's rights amongst others (Schiffers 2015, 28). COBERM runs outside the ENP framework, giving it more flexibility and explicit focus on fostering "people-to-people contacts", "conflict transformation" and – less explicitly – on breaking "the isolation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" to prevent their integration into Russia (Freizer 2017, 167). In this way, the assistance of the EC has helped to shape "the domestic environment in a manner that could foster reform and conflict resolution" (Tocci 2007, 160). However, the EC prefers indirect engagement with several layers and actors between itself and Abkhazian de facto authorities. Another such indirect involvement is carried out by the Paris-based EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), which is associated with and provides recommendations to the EC. It has played an important role in not only providing analytical input to the EU institutions, but also organised roundtables focused on EU policy debate in Abkhazia from 2009 on (Grono 2010, 14).

EEAS, EUSR, EUMM

Two main bodies within EEAS that deal with Abkhazia are the Georgia Desk Office and the EU Delegation to Georgia. The Georgia Desk Office at the EEAS, which nominally deals with Abkhazia as part of Georgia, does little outreach to Abkhazia and primarily sees itself supporting Georgia's territorial integrity through mediation that will eventually bring the breakaway regions back into Georgia (Interview with Chris Kendall¹⁷³). However, Bouris & Fernandez-Molina (2018, 15) report that in the case of Sahrawis and Palestinians, meetings mostly happen upon request by the representatives of contested states at the EEAS headquarters, usually and at head of division or desk officer levels. It seems that no concerns about recognition prevent the EEAS officials from regularly receiving de facto authorities. Another obstacle to engagement on the part of the EEAS, mentioned by Shapovalova (2016, 12) is that according to an EEAS policy-maker, people working in NGOs have been involved in conflict resolution for decades in contrast with people working for the international organisations, who are “in and out.” The EU Delegation in Tbilisi adheres to the same policy guidelines as the EEAS, but also does some engagement and occasionally visits the breakaway regions. They, however, consciously avoid engaging formally with de-facto authorities preferring to create the opportunities to work with international organizations, NGOs and to continue supporting the welfare of the population, an objective shared by the government of Georgia (Interview with Carlo Natale).

The European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for South Caucasus and Georgia, who reports directly to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (who is at the same time also the Vice-President of the EC and heads the EEAS), is more involved in engagement, with frequent trips to Abkhazia. The EUSR's mandate developed from merely “assisting” conflict resolution in 2003 to more proactively “contributing” to the resolution of the conflicts with the appointment of Peter Semneby in 2006. This change reflects a more general change in the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy towards

¹⁷³ Chris Kendall was the Political Counsellor for Strategy and Communication at the Eastern Partnership section of the EEAS when this interview was conducted.

the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Malyarenko & Wolff 2012, 193–194). According to Jeppsson (2015, 20), EUSR's work and regular visits to Abkhazia have been instrumental in preserving links with Abkhazia. The EUSR travelled to Sukhum/i on regular basis for consultations, with the UN taking care of practical arrangements. After Russia vetoed an extension of the UNOMIG mission, the EUSR established “more direct links with the Abkhaz” (Interview with Fredrik Wesslau¹⁷⁴). The EUSR's unique position allows it to have the best channels of communication with Abkhazia. It is not accredited to Georgia in particular, but has an international mandate, meaning that it can interact with Abkhazian de facto authorities without crossing any red lines on recognition (Interview with Chris Kendall). It is also different from other EU external services in that people do not change every 3-4 years (Interview with Carlo Natale), meaning that institutional knowledge and communications are less affected by the turnover.

After the departure of OSCE and UN observers, the EUMM is the only international body with a permanent presence on the ground (Fean 2009, 20). This is symbolically important for the EU, which has in this way “gained recognition as a security actor in the South Caucasus” (Freire & Simão 2013, 474). However, the mission is limited to the Georgian side of the Inguri river and is not allowed entry into Abkhazia. It also has no funding for projects and its primary role is in observing incidents along the Administrative boundary line (Schiffers 2015, 27). Shapovalova (2016, 12) notes that EUMM cooperates with a local NGO running a radio station that reaches out to the local population in Abkhazia to counter the myths about the mandate and the activities of the EUMM. Additionally, the EUMM officials disseminate its monitoring observations to NGOs to reach out to the population and authorities that the mission otherwise does not have access to. This indicates that EUMM's role transcends mere monitoring to include public diplomacy. Indeed, the mandate of the mission encompasses four main goals: stabilization, normalization, confidence-building, and information provision (Freire & Simão 2013, 471). Through intermediaries it is also able to reach beyond the border and into Abkhazia. France and Germany are the biggest

¹⁷⁴ Fredrik Wesslau was the Director of the Wider Europe Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations and a former Political Adviser to EUSR when this interview was conducted.

contributors of monitors (Nichol 2010, 14–15) with Italian involvement also being prominent early on (Fean 2009, 6–7).

As is clear from the overview of the main EU institutions, differences among them in relation to their attitude and engagement with Abkhazia are not only conceptual but also behavioural and there are often discrepancies between the two. The expectation that institutions, which use stricter language (often borrowed from Georgia) are more reluctant to engage, is not necessarily true. For instance, the EP, which is the only EU institution that refers to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as to 'occupied territories', sent official delegations of MEPs to visit the territories, while the role of the Council has been quite political, but also very vague in terms of language.

US foreign policy towards Abkhazia

Just like the EU, the US has no declared foreign policy towards Abkhazia. Its close relations with Georgia, especially during Saakashvili's presidency, made the US an even stauncher supporter of the Georgian territorial integrity. The question that arises here is not why there is so little US engagement with Abkhazia but why there is any at all? As I did in the section on the EU's foreign policy towards Abkhazia, I look at the interests and actors in US foreign policy to answer this question.

Interests: energy and security cooperation

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the US engagement with Abkhazia was shaped by its interests in energy and security potential of the region. Specifically, since the 1990s the US was interested in access to energy resources in the region amid rising oil prices, and since 2001 in closer security cooperation amid the War on Terror. While the main object of interest in energy was Azerbaijan, the main object of interest in security cooperation was Georgia, especially after the coming to power of Saakashvili. Focusing on these two interests does not, just like in the case of the EU, mean that other interests were

not present. Just like the EU, the US too took an interest in conflict resolution and acted as a normative player, promoting democracy and the free market.

The 'Contract of the Century' and the BTC pipeline

In the early 1990s the US showed little active interest in the Caucasus, mostly regarding it as part of the Russian sphere of influence, implicitly consenting to the Russian notion of 'near-abroad' (Lund 1999, 6). However, by the mid-1990s, the second Clinton Administration started taking a keen interest in economic interests in Azerbaijan – going as far as appointing a Special Adviser to the President and the Secretary of State for Caspian Basin Energy Diplomacy and signing the 'Contract of the Century' with Azerbaijan in 1994 (MacFarlane, 1999). US interests in the energy sector are centred on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which provides an alternative supply of crude oil, allowing for diversification and hence limiting Russia's (and possibly Iran's) dominance of the Caspian oil resources (Akçakoca et al. 2009, 29).

The security of the pipeline also involved an interest in the security and Georgia, which is why the US became progressively more concerned about emerging security threats, including the involvement of Russian military in Abkhazia and Chechnya (Börzel et al. 2019, 166). The defeat of the Georgians against a numerically smaller opponent in the Georgian-Abkhaz War testified to the weakness of the Georgian armed forces (Fawn 2002, 138). Indeed, during 1990s, the US considered Georgia to be at risk of becoming a failed state and supported programs of democratic, economic, and security reform that centred on institution building (Peters & Bittner 2006, 20). The pursuit of a narrow "national security agenda" in Georgia prevented the US from playing a larger and more constructive role in conflict resolution, which meant leaving the UN and OSCE as the key players in conflict resolution (Malyarenko & Wolff 2012, 205). In looking at the early involvement of the US in the region, we can conclude that the economic interest in energy was of prime importance, but that due to security threats and the weakness of the Georgian state, US interests broadened to include security interests. At first these security interests were narrowly focused on energy

security, but they soon cascaded into shoring up Georgian state institutions and training the Georgian army.

The War on Terror and the Rose Revolution

With the onset of the War on Terror, security became an independent concern, no longer tied only to energy security. By far the most important issue pushing it up the US security agenda, was the proximity of South Caucasus to Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East. Since the US needed access to the airspace of all three countries in the South Caucasus, this led to a prompt establishment of two airbases in Georgia under joint US-Turkish control (Akçakoca et al. 2009, 30). However, the presence of Chechen terrorists in Russia and Georgia – the Pankisi Gorge (Peters & Bittner 2006, 20) – drew increased US interest to the region. The Caucasus that has been one of the priorities of the US foreign policy for its resources, now also became a source of instability (İşeri 2009, 34–35). The US declared the Caucasus as a region of “vital interests” and NATO as a “strategic region” (Bryn & Coletti 2015, 190–191). In 2002, American military personnel were sent to Georgia to help train Georgian special forces in combating terrorism under the Georgia 'Train and Equip' program (GTEP), which ran for 20 months and involved 150-200 US military instructors. This of course alarmed both Abkhazia and Russia (Fawn 2002, 138–139; Tocci 2007, 140–141), the first seeing American presence and the discourse of ‘stability’ as a veiled disguise for US intervention in the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia, while the Russians saw it as a threat to its influence in Georgia that was already diminished by Russian military withdrawals (Fawn 2002, 139). The unintended consequence of GTEP on Abkhazia has been the fear of US-supported or independent Georgian attack (Fawn 2002, 140). This was further compounded by pronouncements of officials, such as the Georgian Special Forces Captain Shalvab Badzhelidze, a participant in GTEP, who declared: “Pankisi is a minuscule problem. Regular troops and police can handle that.” Instead, he claimed, “We are doing something much more serious. We are training for an operation in Abkhazia.” (Fawn 2002, 140). It is sometimes forgotten that all this took place during the presidency of Shevarnadze, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, and before Saakashvili – a staunchly pro-American firebrand – came to power.

As Cooley and Mitchell (2009, 31–32) note, after the Rose Revolution, the US was no longer interested in presenting itself as “an honest broker” that considers the concerns of the Georgians and the Abkhaz alike. It abandoned its problem-solving approach and aspirations to reach a compromise, consistently framing the discussion as a question of the restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia. The initial US interest in energy that became progressively concerned with security and especially terrorism, now became more closely bound to supporting Georgia both discursively and militarily. In its policy towards Georgia and Abkhazia, the US has been cooperating with the EU and despite staying engaged in conflict resolution as part of the GID, it has progressively reduced its role and influence in favour of the EU.¹⁷⁵ Although the US remains cautious of unwittingly initiating the use of “hard power” in the South Caucasus through the strategic partnership with Georgia, it has been ready to support a policy of “soft power” regarding Georgia’s conflict with Abkhazia. This includes a US commitment to fostering contacts between populations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with those of the rest of Georgia (Welt 2010, 11–12).

Actors: Track one and Track two

While the EU’s engagement of Abkhazia is shaped by a plurality of member states and institutions, the US is a much more unitary actor, which is not necessarily obvious from their respective policies of engagement. The EU’s plurality is mediated through an approach of ‘engagement without recognition’ that aims at providing a guideline and focusing the efforts of various actors within the EU. Although the US supports the EU efforts for engagement, it is itself much closer to a more restrictive, Georgian notion of engagement, which has the explicit purpose of bringing Abkhazia back into Georgia. What is interesting, however, is that given the more unitary and restrictive nature of US approach to engagement, it has in practice often been more flexible in its dealings with the Abkhazian de facto authorities and the civil society. For instance, the US

¹⁷⁵ This is visible in the institutional framework of conflict resolution processes: the US is not a co-chair in GID (unlike the EU) as it is in the OSCE Minsk Group on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (Baun 2006, 7). The interest in being a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group established in 1992, was without a doubt related to the primary interests of the US in South Caucasus – that of access to Azerbaijani energy resources in the early 1990s.

diplomats involved in the GID hold informal discussions with the Abkhaz, while the EU delegates refuse to do so. The EU is also shier in admitting the fact that it is funding projects in Abkhazia. To understand why this is so, I look at the issue from the point of view of the common distinctions between track one and track two diplomacy. Again, focusing on this distinction here does not serve to deny that I could apply it equally to the EU (where I preferred to focus on member states and institutions), but to highlight the plurality of approaches undertaken by different actors and explain US flexibility vis-à-vis the EU. This section also tries to focus on the actors on the other side of engagement – the Abkhaz actors engaged by the US: the de facto authorities, the civil society, and various actors engaged in lobbying activities in the US on behalf of the Abkhaz.

Track one: low profile, more flexibility in the GID?

The US is involved in the GID, but since there are “3 co-chairs, none of which is American, and they are all kind of European”, it plays a smaller role than the EU. However, the fact that they have a lower profile, perhaps allows them to “talk with the Abkhazian delegation during coffee breaks”, which the EU delegates do not do (Interview with Susan Allen¹⁷⁶). In the GID, the US follows Georgian guidelines on engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, outlined in the Law on Occupied Territories and the Strategy on Occupied Territories, much more closely than the EU, including referring to Abkhazia and Ossetia as to ‘occupied territories’ – the term was first used by the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who in July 2010 publicly referred to the Russian presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as to an “occupation” while on tour of the region (Berg and Pegg 2016, 10). This poses a question to what extent is the US engagement with Abkhazia an independent policy as opposed to a one borrowed from Georgia, like the concept of occupation. In other words, to what extent is the US engaging with Abkhazia as opposed to supporting Georgian engagement with the breakaway region? Opinions among scholars are divided. According to Welt (2010, 2), the latter is closer to the truth as the US is not so much directly engaging with Abkhazia and South Ossetia as supporting Georgia’s engagement with Abkhazia

¹⁷⁶ Susan Allen was the Director of the Center for Peacemaking Practice at George Mason University when this interview was carried out.

and South Ossetia before addressing the issue of final status. However, Berg and Pegg (2016) paint a different picture, stating “that the conventional wisdom that de facto states are typically shunned as illegal pariahs is wrong. The United States, at least, regularly engages these entities on a wide variety of different subjects” (Berg and Pegg 2016, 17). The US considers parent-state preferences, but they do not determine “its willingness to engage de facto states. Strategic considerations arguably play a greater role in influencing US interactions with de facto states.” (Berg and Pegg 2016, 17). Given that Berg and Pegg’s analysis is both relatively recent and empirically well grounded, their conclusions seem valid. Nevertheless, the triangle US-Georgia-Abkhazia is much more complicated than is often presented in a reductionist accounts of Georgia’s fear of other actors crossing red lines on engagement that might amount to “creeping recognition”. As (Caspersen 2018, 15) puts it, “there is no clear threshold beyond which the relationship between the parent state and the de facto state, or their relative position, is altered. Red lines are negotiable in practice and are shaped by perceptions and internal politics, rather than international law.” Georgia prefers to “look to the US rather than the EU for political backing” (Whitman and Wolff 2010, 94) and has even “encouraged the US to become more actively involved in Abkhazia (Berg and Pegg 2016, 6).

Track one-and-a-half: the story of the cables

Track one-and-a-half diplomacy generally refers to unofficial contacts between official state representatives (Allen Nan 1999). In their innovative analysis of WikiLeaks cables, Berg and Pegg’s (2016) show a more complete picture of interactions between the US and Abkhazia that would have remained hidden if it wasn’t for the leaks of the US diplomatic cables hosted on the website of WikiLeaks. In their study, Berg and Pegg’s (2016, 17) show that the US does differentiate between different de facto states, not treating them all in the same way. This means that there is no overarching policy on engagement with de facto states. Data suggests that US engagement didn’t change after the change in presidency from Bush to Obama, but the cables show that “US engagement decisions are often reactive or opportunistic, driven by specific events or crises.” (*ibid.*). For instance, the US increased its engagement with Abkhazia in 2009 as

a way of countering Russia's increasing influence in the South Caucasus (*ibid.*, 8). In terms of volume of cables, Abkhazia and NKR were less engaged than Transnistria (*ibid.*, 7). In terms of content, roughly three-quarters of US engagement with Abkhazia was neutral, with around fifteen percent hostile and only 2 cables supportive (*ibid.*, 4). Although the data shows that there is more communication between the US and Abkhazia than one would assume and that the majority is not hostile, one should not overestimate its importance or impact. US officials continue to have very little contact with Abkhaz authorities outside the GID and their policy remains one of supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia, but through "strategic patience" (Phillips 2011, 16).

Track two: US engagement with the Abkhaz civil society

The GID has not been producing the result desired by the EU and the US – coming closer to resolving the conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia. The US has in some cases in the past got involved in domestic politics to promote a regime change and break political deadlocks. However, the US does not engage in domestic politics in Abkhazia and seems to lack trust in the Abkhazian opposition (Berg and Pegg 2016, 13). Another option to break a deadlock in negotiations is to open a parallel channel (track two) and involving the civil society in hope of conflict transformation. The US has shown that it is willing to engage with Abkhazian civil society organizations. The aim is to prevent a complete Russian takeover of the region and to keep the option of "eventual reintegration with the rest of Georgia" but the logistics of these engagements in trying to avoid implying any kind of recognition, can be complicated (Berg and Pegg 2016, 14). While European NGOs like Conciliation Resources (UK), Saferworld (UK), Berghof (Germany), Danish Refugee Council (Denmark), and Kvinna Till Kvinna (Sweden) (Schiffers 2015, 30) have been more present in Abkhazia than US ones, some US projects have been running for a very long time, for instance Paula Garb's University of California at Irvine-sponsored project.

One of the problems the US faces in engaging with the civil society in Abkhazia is misperception. Abkhazian NGOs are not seen as representative of the general population but as an "avant-garde" that can introduce "new ways of thinking and

acting” regarding the conflict (Stewart 2004, 15). This means that the outreach to the society in general is very limited. Another problem is that the US policy makers fail to understand the pressures the civil society in Abkhazia faces, such as the social pressure not to take Georgian-issued Status Neutral passports. They also sometimes do not understand that there is significant “anti-Russian sentiment in Abkhazia” (Interview with Susan Allen). Policy-makers often lack the understanding of the “historical and cultural context, which are so crucially important for an adequate understanding of the roots and perspectives of Abkhazian-Georgian conflict” (Shevchenko 2013, 14–15) and fail to understand the Abkhaz rejection of “the possibility of remaining part of the Georgian state” (Akaba & Khintba, 2011, 15). Failure to understand the cultural context, including the notion of honour (covered in Chapter 4), prevents the policy-makers from realizing that “the Abkhaz have pride and don’t go around begging for engagement” (Interview with Susan Allen). It seems that while the relatively low profile of the US in GID allows for more flexibility, but in engagement with the civil society, “the EU has found more flexible mechanisms” (Interview with Susan Allen). This has contributed to the fact that after a halt in the progress of track one diplomacy, track two diplomacy has come to a standstill (Hoch 2009, 88).

Abkhazia’s proactiveness: lobbying in the US

Despite the absence of diplomatic breakthroughs and public engagement, as Berg and Pegg (2016) have demonstrated, a lot of interaction happens under the radar. Little of it is documented, so most of my information comes from my interviews with individuals involved in advocating for Abkhazia’s recognition and engagement. Contrary to my expectations, interviews with people involved with Abkhazia in the EU and the US have pointed to the fact that Abkhazians were quite proactive in seeking contact and sometimes presented concrete ideas for furthering engagement. According to Fredrik Wesslau, Political Advisor to the EUSR for the South Caucasus, the Abkhaz “were quite proactive. They wanted us to fund development projects which went in direction of state-building, that fell outside of the framework of non-recognition and that we could not do.” (Interview with Fredrik Wesslau).

Lacking representation in the US (but also in international fora, such as the US-based UN), Abkhazia has tried to advocate for itself by using different intermediaries – from Russian diplomats to Abkhaz diaspora, and private companies. According to Elene Agladze from the Permanent Representation of Georgia to the UN, “the Abkhaz voice is communicated to the missions by the Russian mission [to the UN], which distributes documents to other missions” (Interview with Elene Agladze¹⁷⁷). Diaspora representatives seem to have played a more important role before, but no longer do. Yanal Kazan, a chiropractor based in Patterson, New Jersey, served as Ardzinba’s representative in the US until 1999. According to him, he was able to get more than 50 audiences with country ambassadors and representatives at the UN, explaining the motives behind Abkhazia’s actions. However, the majority was pro-Georgian, and it was an uphill battle from the beginning (Interview with Yanal Kazan). He also tried to bring Ardzinba to the UN but was unsuccessful. He arranged several press conferences and even arranged for officials from Siemens and Ericsson to visit Abkhazia. Frustrated by the lack of the Geneva process, Yanal Kazan resigned in 1999 and to his knowledge nobody has been representing Abkhazia in the US since (Interview with Yanal Kazan). Nikolai Zlobin, a D.C.-based Russian political scientist and journalist, also tried to act as an intermediary to bring the Abkhaz delegation to the US. According to him, President Baghapsh could visit the US under a UN invitation and present his case. However, they have sent some documents before and “did not get a good response” so they decided that “it is a lost case” (Interview with Nikolai Zlobin¹⁷⁸). President Baghapsh was more successful in reaching out to the Washington Times, where his opinion was published in the editorial pages on 16 October 2009. As Whitman & Wolff (2010, 87) have noted, it was a “remarkable turn of events” that a leader of a largely unrecognised breakaway region was given such a platform given what had happened in August 2008 and given the very close relationship between the US and Georgia. This “turn of events”, however, did not happen spontaneously. In August 2009, Abkhazian and South Ossetian governments contracted the

¹⁷⁷ Elene Agladze was the Deputy Ambassador of Georgia to the UN when when this interview was conducted.

¹⁷⁸ Nikolai Zlobin was the President of the Center on Global Interests (CGI) when this interview was conducted.

services of Steven Ellis's Saylor Company (each de facto state had its own contract and communications were kept separate). According to Mr. Ellis, the company provided media relations services to the de facto states for about a year:

"We pretty much became their embassy in Washington. We shared their statements with the Congress and the State Department. We never met anyone, but we shared our statements with them and I know that they read them. I'm not sure if they did anything about it, but they read them" (Interview with Steven Ellis).

They reached out to the Western media outlets in Europe and the US with a document called "issues points", which included an interview or a summary of their achievements or talking points. They sent one every week to a list of 400 to 500 recipients and engaged with their government representatives "almost on daily basis". Of course,

"nobody in the US Government could acknowledge that we talked to them. They would be polite and would listen to us. A couple of members of staff in the Congress did agree to see the Abkhaz. We shifted a narrative to the point when people at least said let's see what they have to say" (ibid.).

Nevertheless, it seems that the Abkhaz ran out of patience quite soon:

"I think they ultimately expected recognition. They expected they would get feature stories about them by the mainstream media. When they didn't get it, they were disappointed. The Abkhaz ran out of patience because they didn't understand that this takes a lot of time" (ibid.).

It was easier to raise awareness about Abkhazia in Europe than in the US, probably because Abkhazia is more relevant to the EU than to the US. According to Mr. Ellis, the Abkhaz "didn't understand how Western media works" and "were impressed not by how much we knew, but by how much they didn't know." For that reason, it seems that the Saylor Company didn't only provide the de facto states media relations services, but also a learning opportunity: "We gave them a sense of how the Western governments, especially the US government works. We gave them an opportunity to advance their communication strategies" (*ibid.*).

Through a closer analysis of interests and actors on both sides of engagement, a more complex picture emerges as do parallels and differences between EU and US engagement strategies. In the next two sections, I look at the latter even closer within a chronological context to better understand how the two approaches developed.

The US adopted a harsher language vis-à-vis Abkhazia, going as far as adopting the Georgian term 'occupied territories' after the Russian-Georgian War and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia in 2008. This has constrained both its engagement with Abkhazia as well as prevented it from playing a role of an independent and credible moderator. However, the good US-Georgian relations do not fully explain the reluctance to engage with Abkhazia. Abkhazia's distance from the US, its small size, economic insignificance, dependence on Russia as well as historical and cultural factors come into play here. Perhaps even more interesting, the mentioned constraints to engagement have not entirely prevented the US engagement with Abkhazia. As has been explored in this section, this can be attributed to the lower profile and hence greater flexibility of US policy makers in the conflict resolution process, their more informal way of engagement with the Abkhaz (over lunch), and as Berg and Pegg (2016, 17) have observed, to "strategic considerations", namely the wish to counterbalance Russia's influence in the region. Abkhazia's level of proactiveness in certain periods, especially between 2008 and 2010 went beyond my expectations and, as I elaborate in Chapter 7, can be considered one of the important empirical contributions of this thesis.

EU and US engagement with Abkhazia 1999-2008

A snapshot of interests and actors involved in EU and US engagement of Abkhazia presented in this chapter so far shows the complexity of factors affecting engagement, from geopolitical to inter-institutional and linguistic. A snapshot, however, is a still image and gives us no sense in how engagement developed throughout time. I cover this next.

The 1990s: Prelude to engagement

During the Georgian-Abkhaz War 1992-1993 and during the early period of Abkhaz de facto statehood (when it was under the CIS-enforced embargo), the EU and the US involvement in conflict resolution was minimal. According to Sabanadze (2002, 13), the main mediator – and to some extent participant – in the active phase of the conflict was Russia. The UN faced increased pressure from the Georgian government to deploy a peacekeeping force but the fact that only an observer mission (UNOMIG) was established, testifies to the wish of the Russia to keep its leading role in conflict management throughout the post-Soviet space (MacFarlane 1999, 36). Indeed, the UN's role was only to supervise a Russian-brokered ceasefire.¹⁷⁹ By the end of 1990s, the US and several EU member states also gained a chair at the table, but not the EU itself. In fact, the EU was only legally established after the Georgian-Abkhaz ceasefire (July 1993) and the establishment of the UNOMIG (August 1993), in November 1993 when the Maastricht Treaty came into force and replaced the European Economic Community (EEC). According to Freire and Simão (2013, 467), for much of the 1990s, relations between the EU and Georgia remained marginal in respect to the agendas of both actors. The EU saw Georgia as a “distant country” facing secessionist problems in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while still under the deep influence of Russia. Vasilyan (2014, 402) traced EU's first attempts to conflict resolution to a 1995 EC document entitled ‘Towards a European Union Strategy for Relations with the Transcaucasian Republics’, which “called for a ‘coordinated strategy’ towards the ‘region’ following the end of the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, through the extension of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs)” and identified conflict-resolution as one of the objectives. This was full two years after the war in Abkhazia ended. In the 1990s, the US and EU engagement with Abkhazia was mostly one-way and limited to condemnations of Abkhazia's declarations of sovereignty, independence, and the

¹⁷⁹ As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, as the international attention grew the group ‘Friends of Georgia’ was established under the auspices of the UN to help manage and resolve the conflict. The group included the US, the UK, Germany, France, and Russia (Sabanadze 2002, 14).

holding of elections.¹⁸⁰ Both the EU and the US sent humanitarian aid but most of it was earmarked for Georgia¹⁸¹ and little if any reached Abkhazia, partially also due to corruption, crime and smuggling along the de facto border (Ghazaryan 2010, 233). Further constraining engagement was the reluctance of multilateral agencies to continue their assessment and programming activities in Abkhazia (MacFarlane 2000, 58). Russia, too, was unwilling to let other actors meddle in what it considered its 'near abroad'. In August 1997, Yeltsin stated that Russia would continue to mediate talks between Georgia and Abkhazia and would not let the US take over. The Geneva process started in December 1998, but negotiations were soon deadlocked and as a clear sign of lack of patience, on October 12, 1999 the Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia was signed and entered into force.

Early 2000s: US and EU presence grows

The early 2000s saw growing interest of US and the EU. The terrorist attacks in the US in September 2001 saw an increase of American interest in the region both because of its logistical importance in their operations in Afghanistan and later Iraq, and because of the presence of terrorist groups in Chechnya and the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia (Tocci 2007, 140–141). In 2002 the US special forces military instructors arrived to train and equip Georgian forces. The EU funding increased significantly after 1999, when the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Georgia and the EU entered into force (Whitman and Wolff 2010, 89). The EU was also increasing its political footprint in the region. In 2001, an EU troika visited the region and the EU was accepted as a member of the OSCE Control Commission for South Ossetia (Peters & Bittner 2006, 18). In early 2003, a delegation of the EP visited Sukhum/i but failed to convince the Abkhaz side to resume political dialogue with Georgia, with the Abkhaz delegation not even attending the subsequent Geneva process meeting (Vasilyan

¹⁸⁰ Đorđević (2010, 35) claims that dismissing elections as “contrary to the established international law” extends the non-recognition of statehood to also include non-recognition of state-building and regime.

¹⁸¹ According to Tocci (2007, 140–141), since the beginning of the 1990s, Georgia has been one of the largest recipients of US aid per capita. In the period 1992–2005 total US aid to Georgia amounted to \$3bn.

2014, 410).¹⁸² Uncoordinated attempts of EU institutions and such ad-hoc delegations convinced the EU of a need for new bodies and mechanisms to deal with the problem. In 2003, the ENP was developed (which Georgia joined in 2004) and the first EUSR for the South Caucasus, Heikki Talvitie, was appointed. Dobrescu & Schumacher (2018, 2) see this as a milestone, claiming that before 2003 the EU's involvement in Georgia was mostly economic and technical but that the Rose Revolution created a favorable context for the EU to broaden "its range of policy instruments." This signaled the EU's greater preparedness to take up a greater role as a conflict mediator, which its increasing political and economic presence in the Caucasus but also its aspirations to act as a normative actor, demanded. In doing so, the EU also used the opportunities created by the 2003 Rose Revolution, the US shift in "security alignments", and the problems that Russia encountered trying to maintain its influence in the 'near abroad' (Freire & Simão 2013, 467).

Mid-to-Late 2000s: US and EU encounter Russian resistance

Even in the second half of 2000s, the EU's involvement in conflict resolution was seen as insufficient. German (2007, 359) claimed that its role was mostly in "supporting organisations such as the UN and OSCE, which have taken the lead role" but acknowledged that the EU has the opportunity of becoming more involved. While the US got involved in 'hard matters' of security (training and equipping the Georgian Army) and politics (unreserved support for Saakashvili's pro-American policies), the EU's main concern "was not to antagonize Moscow by supporting a radical change in the status quo", which was being promoted by Saakashvili in Georgia. Instead, it sought to support the existing mechanisms of conflict resolution, under the aegis of the UN and the OSCE (Freire and Simão 2013, 469). Thus, the EU opted for de-politicized projects that the Commission presented as apolitical to assuage both Russia and its own reluctant member states (*ibid.*), keeping a low, mostly economic profile (Vinatier 2009, 91).

¹⁸² The Abkhaz side eventually returned to the Geneva negotiations in April 2005, but only due to Russian mediation (Vasilyan 2014, 411)., which proved once more that Russia was the lead mediator and the US, and the EU could only play a secondary role.

However, by mid-2000s, the US also tried to pursue a more cautious policy, avoid openly discussing the question of the breakaway regions and criticizing Russia too often, leading Peters and Bittner (2006, 22) to conclude that this cautious approach led to a “dangerous impression” that the South Caucasus is still part of Russia’s sphere of influence and that “the Europe of Yalta continuous to exist” (Peters and Bittner 2006, 22). As I have discussed in Chapter 5, from 2004 on and with the change of regimes through the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Russia increasingly pushed back and criticized the EU and the US for what it saw as interference in its sphere of privileged interests. Russia increasingly acted as a gatekeeper to the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides as “power-related interests dominated the mediation” (Vasilyan 2014, 411). Despite significant increases in funding,¹⁸³ political visits to the region and the creation of a new body to deal with conflict resolution (EUSR), Whitman and Wolff (2010, 96) have assessed the role played by the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as “relatively marginal until summer 2008.” German (2007, 356) gave a similar assessment, praising the EU’s financial efforts but expressing the need to engage politically to more effectively support conflict resolution. With the Abkhaz and South Ossetians having no voice in the key negotiating formats, the political influence of the EU “remains extremely limited.” Nevertheless, according to De Wall (2017, 1), the EU has only achieved modest success in Abkhazia, mainly by maintaining some leverage over the de facto authorities and by providing a few connections between the Abkhaz and the rest of the world, without compromising the EU’s relationship with Georgia (De Waal 2017, 1).

In the early 1990s, Abkhazia was not high on the agenda of either the EU or the US. In the case of the EU, it was overshadowed by the war in the Balkans and in the case of the US, by the Gulf War. In late 1990s and early 2000s they became progressively more interested in resolving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict each for its own reasons: the US for energy security, counter-terrorism and export of democracy, while the EU also shared these interests but also viewed the Caucasus as a potential region of EU expansion. By mid-2000s, however, both

¹⁸³ The EU became the largest donor to the South Caucasus, financing rehabilitation programs in Abkhazia and South Ossetia since 1997 and providing assistance worth €33m to the two conflict zones between 1997 and 2005 (German 2007, 365).

the EU and the US found themselves at an impasse regarding their engagement of Abkhazia especially due to Russia's pushback but also due to negative views of Abkhazian population, which did not see the EU and the US as neutral mediators.¹⁸⁴ It would take the August War in 2008 for this deadlock to be broken.

EU and US engagement with Abkhazia 2009-2014

Ironically, Russian recognition of Abkhazia after the August War in 2008 made conflict resolution with a view of Abkhazia's re-integration virtually impossible yet engagement increased, with the EU playing a more prominent role than before. The reasons for this were on the part of the EU and the US 1) the desire to prevent similar escalations that lead to the war in 2008; 2) the fear of Abkhazia and South Ossetia becoming completely dependent on Russia; and on the part of Abkhazia 3) a wish to develop relations with as many international actors as possible in line with its multi-vector foreign policy (explored further in Chapter 4). I look at the increased interest in engagement and its gradual waning in the next section.

2008-2010: GID and renewed conflict-resolution efforts

After the conflict resolution was re-launched in the new format of GID (discussed in more detail earlier in this chapter) in October 2008, the EU not only got a seat at the table, but was made a co-chair, giving it the higher profile it desired. At the same time, the EUMM was established, so that in October 2008 EU observers were already on the Georgian side of the Abkhaz-Georgian border. The US, too, has remained active in mediation, but started acting in a more supportive role (Simão 2018, 108), reflected in the fact that it was not among the co-chairs in the new GID format. Interest in greater US engagement was also constrained by seeing that Russia could easily outmatch whatever the US offered and by the close relationship with Georgia, especially during Saakashvili's presidency, when the US governments have been reluctant to even criticise Georgia (Interview with

¹⁸⁴ Khintba (2010) claims that "Europe is not fully perceived as a neutral mediator" mostly because through its "reiteration of the principle of territorial integrity of Georgia", it has failed to obtain "a crucial amount of credibility needed to affect attitudes of the Abkhazian side." The support for Georgia's territorial integrity has reduced EU's acceptability as a mediator (Grono 2010, 7) in the eyes of the Abkhaz and has weakened EU's position as a mediator (Jeppsson 2015, 26).

Henry Hale¹⁸⁵). On the one hand, after it had recognised Abkhazia, Russia was more than ever the gatekeeper able to exert more control so that engagement became “contingent on Russia’s acceptance of the terms of engagement” (Interview with Cory Welt¹⁸⁶). On the other hand, the US and to the lesser extent the EU faced demands from Georgia to closely coordinate their engagement with guidelines set out in the Law on Occupied Territories. The US eventually adopted the Georgian discourse that led to effective criminalisation of any international engagement with Abkhazia that Georgia did not approve (Cooley 2015, 30). Perhaps the most important process related to engagement with Abkhazia in this period, was the gradual development of the concept of ‘engagement without recognition as a possible policy solution to so-called frozen conflicts involving post-Soviet de facto states. The concept started appearing almost simultaneously in policy circles (it was used by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany and the EUSR Peter Semneby) and in the academia (Cooley & Mitchell 2010; Caspersen & Herrberg 2010; Fischer 2010).

With the EU being more active and the US maintaining its level of engagement, questions of coordination appeared. Simão (2018, 108) has attributed subsequent US reluctance to the limited coordination between the policies of the EU, the US, and NATO and to “limited commitment of Western powers to regional peace and stability.” (Simão 2018, 108). With the ‘engagement without recognition’ the differences between the EU and the US approach became more pronounced. While ‘engagement without recognition’ explicitly became the EU policy approach and the US didn’t object to it, it was less explicit (Interview with Cory Welt). This could be traced back to the different relationship with the Georgian government between the EU and the US, the choice of a different vocabulary (with the US opting for ‘occupation’), which resulted in EU’s engagement without recognition focusing more on conflict transformation and prevention of further escalation and the US engagement more closely resembling Georgia’s own engagement, aimed explicitly at ‘de-occupation’. The opinions

¹⁸⁵ Henry Hale was the Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, and Co-Director of the Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia) when this interview was conducted.

¹⁸⁶ Cory Welt was an Analyst in European Affairs at the Congressional Research Service when this interview was conducted.

regarding which approach is better are divided among scholars and policy-makers. Some believe that at the GID “there are no differences in substance between our [EU] position and their [US] position” (Interview with Carlo Natale), others argue that the EU approach is more “flexible and creative” and that the US should adopt it (Cooley & Mitchell 2009, 41), yet others believe that the US policy makers “are much smarter and less bureaucratic” (Interview with Antje Herrberg¹⁸⁷). In their engagement with Abkhazia than the EU, whose complex institutional framework and disunity between member states impair its ability to speak with a single voice.

2010-2014: Decreasing interest in engagement on all sides

In late 2010, the Arab Spring captured the attention of the EU and US policy makers. While Abkhazia was falling down the list of items on the EU and the US agendas, it was also becoming (in part because of the disillusionment with what it perceived as insufficient engagement by the EU and the US) more dependent on Russia. Russia was itself further challenging the EU and US presence in the region and in October 2011 it embarked on its own project of regional integration, proposing to establish the Eurasian Customs Union (later rechristened as the Eurasian Economic Union) as a rival regional integration project. The EU, which has by now overshadowed the US as a funder and a mediator in the region, tried to regain initiative by institutional changes and launching new programs. It revised the ENP in 2011, explicitly integrating engagement without recognition in the document and put pressure on Georgia to adopt a similar strategy. However, the 2011 ENP revision largely just continued the EC funding of civil society projects to foster dialogue with Abkhazia (Freizer in Bouris & Schumacher 2017, 171). In May 2011, the EC launched COBERM with the aim of fostering conflict transformation and increasing people-to-people contacts (Freizer in Bouris & Schumacher 2017, 167). In May 2011, the two EUSR mandates in the South Caucasus – the EUSR for the Crisis in Georgia (led by Pierre Morel) and the

¹⁸⁷ Antje Herrberg was the CEO of MediatEur, the European Forum for International Mediation and Dialogue; and a Professor for International Mediation at the College of Europe when this interview was conducted.

EUSR for the South Caucasus (led by Peter Semneby) – were merged into a single body - the EUSR for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia, giving equal weight and attention to solving the Abkhaz, South Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts (Smolnik 2012, 5). Despite these efforts, an EU report from 2011, admitted that “the positions of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were growing even further apart” (Jeppsson 2015, 21).

Hopes of breaking the deadlock were raised in October 2012, when Saakashvili lost parliamentary elections to Bidzina Ivanishvili. After EU’s prodding, Georgia adopted an ‘engagement through cooperation’ policy, which included providing services, such as access to free medical care and universities in Georgia, facilitating the transport of goods over the ABL (Administrative Boundary Line), and providing “status-neutral travel documents” to Abkhazians and South Ossetians (Freizer in Bouris & Schumacher 2017, 163). The appointment of the Paata Zakareishvili – a civil society activist – to run the ministry responsible for Abkhazia and South Ossetia (he changed its name from the Ministry of Reintegration to the Ministry of Reconciliation), was another such step towards dialogue (De Waal 2017, 3–4). However, the Georgian government was still sending mixed signals, on the one hand opting for a more permissive approach that allowed for more economic activity across the de facto border and access to services, while on the other hand considering Abkhazians as citizens of Georgia and re-stating Georgia’s claims to territory integrity (Caspersen 2018, 8).

Unfortunately, hopes of renewed impetus in conflict resolution did not materialize. In fact, the contrary occurred. Abkhazia, which has thus far welcomed international engagement although sometimes regarding it with suspicion, first started pushing against it, most likely inspired by Russia’s foreign agent law, which entered into force in November 2012, requiring NGOs with foreign funding to register as ‘foreign agents’. According to Schiffers (2015, 32–33), in 2013, Sukhum/i-based international organizations were banned from working in Gal/i with the local authorities exhibiting heightened suspicion and asking instead for more engagement along the ABL. The-then President Ankvab stated that “the humanitarian phase is over and that ‘substantial assistance’ in terms of infrastructure is needed. The ‘ban’ was later lifted, but legal unclarity persists.

There is some evidence to suggest that it was Russia, which wanted to restrain international engagement with Abkhazia, for instance the existence of “a regulation specifying that all national staff of international organizations need to get clearance from the Russian Federal Security Service to cross the ABL for work-related purposes” (Schiffers 2015, 32–33). In May 2014, another disruption occurred when a political revolt in Abkhazia ousted President Ankvab. In August 2014, presidential elections were held and the Russia-backed Khajimba emerged as a winner and the new President. By November 2014, Abkhazia and Russia signed a revised 'Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Alliance', which provides for close coordination between Abkhazia and Russia in the military, border protection and police spheres. During the political turmoil in Abkhazia that has eventually tied it even closer to Russia, the EU and Georgia signed the Association Agreement (in July 2014) – an extensive trade partnership – bringing Georgia closer to the EU. One cannot but paraphrase the finding of the EU report from 2011 by stating that the positions of the EU and the US on one hand and Abkhazia on the other are growing even further apart. While Abkhazia has slipped further down the US agenda, the EU has maintained its funding¹⁸⁸ and engagement levels, but the feeling that the window of opportunity has closed and a sense of Abkhazia's growing dependence on Russia and lack of interest in the EU, have set in.

Retrospectively, the 2008-2010 period can be seen as a missed opportunity for engagement,¹⁸⁹ which was constrained by: 1) Russia playing the gatekeeper hampering international engagement with Abkhazia, 2) inability of the EU and the US to coordinate and come up with a clear engagement policy, and 3) gradual loss of interest of the EU and the US in Abkhazia amid more pressing concerns, such as the developments in the Arab world.

As is commonly believed, the recognition of Kosovo, the August War between Russia and Georgia, and the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and Ossetia were

¹⁸⁸ Georgia receives the largest amount of official developmental assistance among all post-Soviet states and ranked the highest among all countries in per capita terms (Schiffers 2015, 18).

¹⁸⁹ As stated earlier, after Russia recognized Abkhazia, the EU stepped up its engagement to prevent Abkhazia from falling completely under the Russian dominance. However, despite strong interest on the behalf of Abkhazia and talks that the EU might open an information office in Sukhumi, the positive trend of engagement failed to continue, mostly due to Georgia's opposition.

watershed moments in EU and US engagement with Abkhazia. However, what is surprising is that as the chances of conflict resolution (with the result of restoring Georgian territorial integrity and the re-incorporation of Abkhazia, subscribed to by the EU and the US) decreased, EU and US engagement increased. This allowed Abkhazia to pursue a much more independent and confident foreign relations strategy, contrary to what most observers expected, which was greater dependence on Russia after it recognised it. This trend, however, only continued for a short period (roughly between 2008 and 2010) and when the window of opportunity was closed, dependence on Russia increased almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Conclusion

In this chapter I present a multi-faceted account of the EU and the US engagement with Abkhazia. As there is a lot of ground to cover, I conducted my analysis along two axes. First, through differentiating between different interests and actors involved. Second, through a chronological account of engagement in which I tried to point to the similarities and differences between interests, actors, levels of engagement and the engagement strategies of the EU and the US. Due to the chapter length restrictions, I was largely forced to leave out discussions on topics, such as the counter-recognition campaigns by the EU and the US, an analysis of the European foreign policy agreements and mechanisms such as the PCA, the ENP, and the AA (that mainly concern Georgia and only marginally Abkhazia, if they apply to it at all), and a more detailed discussion of engagement by sector (for instance, which concrete projects in rehabilitation and infrastructural development the EU and the US fund and what is their impact).

I have taken as a fil rouge of this chapter my research question and shown the relations between interpretations of non-recognition and foreign policy behaviour. One of the conclusions of this chapter is that because states try to maintain a consistent foreign policy in which actions correspond to words, the latter directly affect policy. Defining Abkhazia as a de facto state, a breakaway region, or as an occupied territory therefore has important implications for the foreign policy behaviour of both the de facto state and the actors that interact with it. Another

conclusion is that there is a large variance in how Abkhazia was perceived across time and by different actors. The EU's institutional framework exhibits significant plurality, but also the EU's own status as a mediator and a normative actor, which has fluctuated over time, affected its level of engagement. The US, seen as a more unitary actor, too has shown different levels of engagement mostly because of changing interests – at first the interest in South Caucasus and Georgia remained high but gradually changed from exclusively energy to security, and later waned altogether due to greater challenges in other regions (Middle East and North Africa, Asia-Pacific). The main conclusions emerging from the chronological overview of engagement policies (which should be read in conjunction with the chronological account of Russian-Abkhaz engagement in Chapter 5) are the complexity of factors affecting the quantity and quality of engagement, including domestic politics in Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia, the EU and the US (such as the political change in Abkhazia in 2014), international developments (such as the Arab Spring), enduring interests (such as US interest in securing access to oil), changing interests (growing interest in security after 9/11), and last but not least – perception and conceptualization of status, which I have tried to highlight. Compared to the other two empirical chapters, ontological security was not at the forefront of my analysis. However, the idea that interpretations affect policies and that definitions and self-definitions play a crucial role in ontological security of both the engager and the engaged (explicitly expressed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) and the claim that ostracizing *de facto* states hinders conflict resolution and reduces their willingness for engagement (Ker-Lindsay & Berg 2018, 1) have been shown to have empirical grounds throughout this chapter.

The weak ontological security of the EU, which did not see itself as a successful mediator (having largely failed in this role in 1990s when Yugoslavia descended into civil war at its doorstep) nor a normative actor prevented it from playing an important role in Georgian-Abkhazian conflict resolution. Assertive US foreign policy, which aimed to train and equip the Georgian army and welcomed (in Russian eyes instigated) the Rose and Orange Revolutions, may have correctly estimated that a few hundred special forces and military instructors represented no military threat to Russia, but they may have underestimated the threat they

represented to Russia's ontological security based on defending its 'near abroad' – territories once part of Russia, with large Russian populations that Russia saw as the sphere of its privileged interests – from foreign interference. Above all, few policy makers think of the consequences the use of the term "occupied territory" has for Abkhaz ontological security. Most discussions about this term revolve around whether the word "occupied" is justified, in other words: does Abkhazia have any independent agency or is it fully dependent on Russia to the point of being a puppet state in which Russia calls the shots? However pertinent this question, we should be more worried about the word "territory," which paints a land (without people) that has been illegally taken away (occupied). One does not negotiate with territories as one does with *de facto* states or even breakaway regions. It is possible to negotiate with the occupier (and Georgia has insisted that the conflict is between Russia and Georgia), but the territory itself is seen as a *tabula rasa*, its population at best given no agency and at worst completely ignored. I conclude the empirical part of my research here and continue this discussion in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Findings and Discussion

“From an ideal vantage point on the ground, a formation of planes may be observed in the air. One plane may be out of formation. But the whole formation may be off course [...] In particular, it is of fundamental importance not to confuse the person who is ‘out of formation’ by telling him he is ‘off course’ if he is not.”
– Ronald David Laing (1990, 98).

Introduction

The last chapter of a thesis is the concluding element of the usual progression from description through analysis to synthesis. It is this synthesis that brings together theoretical and methodological discussions from Chapters 1, 2, and 3 with empirical data and analysis from Chapters 4, 5, and 6. This is done by linking the analysis of Abkhazia’s foreign policy with the analyses of all three relationships (Russian-Abkhaz, EU-Abkhazian, and US-Abkhazian) back to the core elements of my theoretical framework (identity, ontological security and geopolitical role). In doing so, this chapter unites different pieces of the puzzle to construct a more complete and coherent picture of Abkhazia’s foreign interactions and to answer the research questions, including my main research question regarding how interactions of Russia, EU and the US with Abkhazia are related to interpretations of non-recognition. First, I shortly summarize the key findings from the empirical chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) and discuss how they relate to existing literature reviewed in Chapter 1. Second, – and this is the heart of this chapter – I answer my research questions drawing on the insights from empirical data. Third, the chapter discusses the various contributions my thesis has made, starting with the fleshing out of my theoretical contributions and continuing with a discussion of the potential and limits to the generalizability of my research. Fourth, the chapter discusses both the case-specific and the wider policy relevance of this thesis. Fifth, the most important shortcomings and limitations are discussed. Sixth, I explore some unanswered and some newly

arisen questions and discuss possible avenues for future research. I conclude with a short summary of the main findings and contributions.

As the reader will remember, in my thesis I set out to study Abkhazia's international engagement from the vantage point of Constructivism, looking at how interpretations of its status shape how other actors engage with it. I drew on de facto state studies for more specific and systematic insight (Caspersen 2013, Isachenko 2012), conceptual nuances (Ker-Lindsay and Berg 2018) and concrete policy analysis (Frear 2014). I have aspired to develop an integrated framework of analysis based on Realism and Constructivism. While the physical security cannot be overestimated as a concern for de facto states and geopolitical interests cannot be overestimated as drivers of great power competition in the Eurasian borderlands, I believe that the literature on de facto states has so far largely neglected the fact that de facto states (breakaway regions that are self-proclaimed independent states) are unrecognised by virtue of a restrictive interpretation (of the right to self-determination) – even stigmatisation. The way they are perceived, conceptualised, and interpreted shapes the way they are interacted with. To preserve both aspects and achieve a Realist-Constructivist synthesis, I have opted for 'hard-soft concepts', such as ontological security, and geopolitical role. For the reason of compatibility, I rejected the linguistic turn in Constructivism focused on narratives and discourse, instead focusing on behaviour and routines. As I argued in Chapter 1, examining state identity can help us explain their foreign policy, while looking at how they interact with other actors, can tell us more about what de facto states are. As I demonstrate in the next section, there is a linkage between identity and interaction of states in Constructivist theory and between status (non-recognition) and engagement with Abkhazia. Although a single-case study, each of the empirical chapters explored a certain aspect of Abkhazia's foreign interactions, with Russian-Abkhaz, EU-Abkhazian, and US-Abkhazian relations offering the most obvious possibility of comparison. By structuring these chapters chronologically, this offers another axis of comparing and synthesising results. Observing variance between actors and time periods in Abkhazia's relationships confirms my claims from Chapter 1 that de facto states are neither strong nor weak, neither viable or non-viable outside their relationships with others. It has important implications for

understanding their agency and conflict dynamics (going against the concept of 'frozen conflict').

Short summary of key findings

Here I present a short summary of the findings from the three empirical chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), discuss key insights, explain how they relate to the existing literature (Chapter 1) and identify ways in which the results confirmed my expectations and some in which they were counter-intuitive.

In Chapter 4, I argued that the internal situation in the de facto state and the wider geopolitical considerations influence interpretations of non-recognition by Abkhazian decision-makers, which in turn shape the foreign policy of Abkhazia. The core question of the chapter was how its identity manifests itself in foreign policy. In it, I also outlined the main foreign policy constraints and capabilities, the foreign policy objectives that Abkhazia pursues and the means it uses.

I started out by looking at the state identity of Abkhazia and traced Morin & Paquin's four elements of national identity (constitutive norms, comparative categories, collective aspirations and cognitive references), I examined *apswara* as a set of constitutive norms, pointing out the importance of honour for the Abkhaz identity. Although previous research (Costello 2015; Shesterinina 2014; Hewitt 1999) has put emphasis on *apswara* and the Abkhaz culture, these were never considered key to understanding Abkhazia's foreign relations. However, as my interviews have confirmed, *apswara* importantly shapes the perspectives of Abkhaz policy-makers. Next, I examined how kin, diaspora, minorities in Abkhazia and other important actors (Georgia, Russia) as well as the international community function as comparative categories. The main takeaway from this part is that as comparative categories (which act like mirrors in which its own identity is reflected), relations with Abkhazia's North Caucasian kin and with Georgia, are of large significance, even if there is very little interaction. Further, with concepts of stigma, shame, and (self-)isolation, I analysed the aspiration to recognition and the aspiration to engagement as the core collective aspirations of Abkhazia. By doing so I have tried to fill the gap in the literature on how lack or

presence of recognition and engagement affects the mindsets of foreign policy decision-makers in de facto states. Some of the key empirical insights here were vacillation between a sense of fatalism and sour grapes by some Abkhazian policy-makers that suggest that non-recognition can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy (this is further discussed in this chapter). In the next section, I examined the media, and cartographical representations. My interviews have confirmed a heavy dependence on Russian media, which acts as a filter through which reality is perceived. The empirical data also confirmed Kabachnik's (2012) account of cartographic representations as a source of anxiety and the extent of politicization of place names. The key findings in the section where I discussed normality through modelling and mimicry, are based on field observations rather than interview data. I examined the performative function of trappings of statehood that serve to project the image of a normal, responsible and 'recognizable' state. I concluded my exposition of the identity of Abkhazia by discussing the geopolitical roles it plays as a way of attempting to maintain both physical and ontological security. The main takeaway from this chapter, based on interviews in Abkhazia as well as on my research in Chechnya (Jakša 2017) is that in trying to maintain ontological security, de facto states sometimes go as far as compromising their physical security and even their existence. In fact, it is only through the perspective of ontological security that such seemingly 'irrational' behaviour can be explained.

In analysing foreign policy constraints and capabilities, I squared accounts from the existing literature (Frear 2014, Smith 2018, Comai 2018) with insights from my fieldwork. I discovered non-recognition to be one of (important, but not the only one) constraining factor alongside the lack of strategy, dependence on Russia, and lack of resources. Unsurprisingly, the MFA proved to be the central institution for the conduct of Abkhazia's foreign policy, but its resources and staffing leave much to be desired. Interviews with MFA officials revealed the conflation of legal and social recognition (which is further discussed in this chapter) and a close relationship between the MFA and the Abkhaz media, which indicates that much of foreign policy is also directed domestically, confirming the earlier stated notion that in de facto states, 'inside' and 'outside' are less strictly separated than in other states; that foreign relations are often a matter of

domestic politics and vice versa. Regarding the question of Abkhazia's foreign policy coordination with Russia, my Abkhaz interlocutors were keen to stress that only some issues are coordinated, and that Abkhazia has "its own course." Concerning the objectives of Abkhazian foreign policy, the interviews confirmed a shift from the main goal of obtaining recognition to short-term objectives (seen as "more realistic") of forging other links, especially expanding trade. Opinions of elites on this matter varied, ranging from insistence on recognition as the most important goal to considering "engagement more important than recognition" and finally to considering recognition "a dream but not a goal". Another key empirical insight in relation to this was the existence of quite different visions of Abkhazia's foreign policy. For instance, when asked about the proactiveness of their foreign policy, the Abkhaz policy-makers mostly talked about the constraints to being proactive. While the then-acting Minister of Foreign Affairs Viacheslav Chirikba saw the constraint in the disinterest of the international community to engage, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maxim Gvinjia also saw constraints in the lack of purpose, ideas and a clear vision on the Abkhazian side.

In Chapter 5, I looked more closely at the Russian-Abkhaz relations in relation to Russia's wider geopolitical considerations, such as its relations with Georgia, the EU, the US, and the situation in the North Caucasus. As in the previous chapter, I looked at both internal factors (national identity and domestic politics) and the international context to examine how Russia perceives and interprets its relationship with Abkhazia and how this shapes the relationship itself. By drawing on Tsygankov (2016) and Morozov (2015), my analysis focused on the role of honour and ontological security in Russian foreign policy. Due to lack of empirical data, I have relied more on process-tracing through literature review and document analysis, giving the chapter a more chronological structure.

First, I traced Russia's ontological security to cultural and historic factors, including the fluctuating and often ambiguous relationship with the West in which Russia has historically sought ontological security through both othering and maintaining relationship routines. One key finding from this historical excavation was that even such processes as NATO expansion were not in the mid-1990s seen by Russian policy-makers (including realists) as military but as

psychological problems, pointing to the relevance of the perspective of ontological security for the analysis of Russia's foreign policy. Next, as Russian decision-makers have repeatedly themselves pointed out (most notably Putin), I identified the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing period of transition, as a key period in which the roots of modern Russian foreign policy must be sought. In this historically 'thick' period, Russia lost its former imperial lands – and with it its status and honour – while acquiring the problem of millions of Russians stranded in now foreign lands in which Russia consequently developed strong interests, eventually conceptualizing them as its 'near abroad'. One of the key insights here is the complexity of domestic political situation and the diverse views regarding strategic matters. The ideological divisions between the Liberals/Westernizers, the Centrists/Conservatives, and the Statists/Civilizationists, which I have supported with the statements of Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Kozyrev, serve to remind us how different the domestic politics and foreign policy-making in Russia was then.

A key insight, most clearly visible in the 1991-1999 period is that Russian-Abkhaz relations were a mere function of Russia's relations with other actors, most importantly Chechnya, Georgia, the US and the EU. It is often forgotten today, even by the de facto state scholars, that Russia was largely supportive of Georgia through the 1990s and Abkhazia remained effectively without a patron state, and under a Russian embargo up to the 2000s. Tracing Russian foreign policy through time, I observed that in the 1990s the North Caucasian vector was of major importance especially due to the war with Chechnya and continued to matter in the early 2000s as a point of US-Russian cooperation in fighting terrorism, declining in importance in the later 2000s. Just the opposite proved to be the case in Russia's relations with the EU and the US – Russia didn't object to their presence in the region (in which it was too weak to defend its own interests) in 1990s but pushed back with increasing strength in 2000s. Between 1999 and 2008 Russian-Abkhaz relations changed radically due to domestic political changes in Russia and Georgia and the consequent change in Russian-Georgian relations. Another takeaway from my analysis is that the Russian-Abkhaz relationship – often seen as either static (full dependence) or linear (ever-growing dependence) – have fluctuated significantly with time, not because of

Russia's relations with other actors, but also due to local dynamics, including the willingness and capacity of Abkhazian political elites and civil society to push back when they saw Abkhazia's core interests being threatened. Although Russia has consolidated its hegemony over Abkhazia, instances of successful resistance (such as to the initial version of the Agreements on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support in 2014) show that it does not amount to domination that some suggest and that the term 'occupied territories' referring to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, would imply. An important insight here is that the ever-closer ties and continuing international isolation of Abkhazia represent a threat to Abkhazia's ontological security through the blending of identities (most residents of Abkhazia own Russian passports, depend on Russian financial assistance, and speak more Russian than Abkhazian). This suggests that if it wants to maintain its ontological security and preserve its identity, Abkhazia will have to carefully balance Russian influence by interacting with other international actors. In doing so, it may be forced to make compromises.¹⁹⁰ It is not clear if Russian policy-makers are aware of this Abkhazian dilemma, but interviews with Russian officials have suggested that they understand that according recognition to Abkhazia was not just a legal recognition of statehood but carried an important symbolic weight as a recognition of their struggle in the Georgian-Abkhaz war, and the "recognition of their state-building efforts".

In Chapter 6, my aim was to present a multi-faceted account of the EU and the US engagement with Abkhazia. I directed my analysis along two axes, looking first at the different interests and actors involved. In the second part of the chapter I then gave a chronological account of engagement in which I tried to point to the similarities and differences between interests, actors, levels of engagement and the engagement strategies of the EU and the US.

Once again, I structured my chapter by my argument to explore the relations between the interpretations of non-recognition and foreign policy behaviour, in this case EU and US engagement of Abkhazia. The results of my research show

¹⁹⁰ It is not likely that Abkhazia could be pushed to a compromise going against its de facto statehood or physical security. However, it is not inconceivable that it may try to appeal to the EU and the US by taking on a more constructive role in the GID, for instance.

significant differences in EU and US interests in Abkhazia, which are largely a function of their interests in South Caucasus as a whole. The US was more involved in the region than the EU in the early 1990s and gradually expanded its interests from resources (oil) access to security (counter-terrorism), but its interest declined in the second half of 2000s. The EU got off to a late start due to internal (the EU itself was only founded in 1993) and external factors (more pressing conflicts in the Balkans, closer to its borders) but became progressively more involved throughout 2000s, overtaking the US as a chief mediator. One of the insights is that the internal diversity of the EU in terms of differences between member states and the EU institutions, is reflected outward. I have outlined several factors that influence the member states' attitudes towards Abkhazia, among them: size, influence, geographical location, relations with Russia, and presence of separatism within their own borders. Among the EU institutions, the European Commission along with the EEAS is most involved in engagement but prefers indirect engagement with several layers and actors between itself and Abkhazian de facto authorities. The European Parliament's role in engagement is quite small but has more flexibility as delegations of MEPs can conduct 'goodwill visits' without fears that this parliamentary diplomacy would cross any red lines. The Council of EU's role is mostly political in mediating between conflict parties, which is probably why its mandate in relation to this remains unclear and it can use 'constructive ambiguity' to enlarge its manoeuvring space. An important insight that went against my expectations was that the EU institutions, which use stricter language are not necessarily more reluctant to engage. For instance, the EP is the only EU institution that refers to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as to 'occupied territories', sent official delegations of MEPs to visit the de facto states.

The main conclusion from the process tracing of engagement policies of the EU and the US is that there are several factors affecting the quantity and quality of engagement, including domestic politics in Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia the EU and the US (such as the political change in Abkhazia in 2014); international developments (such as the Arab Spring); enduring interests (such as US interest in securing access to oil); changing interests (growing interest in security after 9/11); and last but not least, perception and conceptualization of status. Comparing the EU and the US involvement in Geneva International Discussions,

I have concluded that the lower profile of the US delegation allows for more flexibility in engagement compared to the EU delegation. Despite using harsher language of 'occupied territories' when referring to Abkhazia, US diplomats willingly engage with their de facto counterparts, while the EU diplomats do not. Berg and Pegg's (2016) analysis of Wikileaks data has shown that there is more communication between the US and Abkhazia than one would assume and that the majority is not hostile. My interviews with EU and US officials as well as people involved in representing Abkhazia in the US, add to that and point to the fact that the Abkhazia was much more proactive in pursuing its foreign policy goals than is often assumed. This was true especially in the 2008-2010 period, which can be seen as a missed opportunity for engagement. Engagement was constrained by: 1) Russia playing the gatekeeper hampering international engagement with Abkhazia, 2) the inability of the EU and the US to coordinate and come up with a clear engagement policy, and 3) the gradual loss of interest of the EU and the US in Abkhazia amid more pressing concerns, such as the developments in the Arab world. However, a more surprising insight is that as the chances of conflict resolution decreased, EU and US engagement increased. A greater interest in engagement was also reflected in Abkhazia's more confident foreign policy, which went against many predictions immediately after the Russian recognition that Abkhazia would become completely dependent on Russia. That this dependence gradually increased can be attributed to the above-mentioned constraints to engagement, but also to the self-fulfilling prophecy in which constant references to Abkhazia as an occupied territory and puppet state only served to isolate and stigmatise Abkhazia, downplay its agency, and eventually contributed to making it more dependent on Russia.

One consistent thread in my thesis has been the focus on state identity as composed of geopolitical and national identity, with the latter rooted in culture. This has been especially obvious in Chapters 4 and 5 on Abkhazia's foreign policy and Russian-Abkhaz relations, respectively. For several reasons,¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ Firstly, it is was not possible to discuss the national identity of the supra-national EU. Instead, this chapter examined the multi-faceted identity of the EU as it manifests through its institutions. Secondly, while it is certainly possible to discuss the US national identity and ontological security in depth, Abkhazia is of a marginal concern in US foreign policy and does not engage its identity in a way the US-Russian relations do. Indeed, it is often claimed that the outcome of the August

Chapter 6 focused less on identity and ontological security and more on interest and geopolitical role. In the next section, I connect empirical data to these concepts defined in my theoretical framework and connect the concepts between each other to provide a comprehensive and consistent answer to my research questions.

Answering the research questions

The initial research question I started my thesis with was: How do interpretations of non-recognition influence the foreign policy interactions between Abkhazia and recognised actors in the international community: Russia, the EU and the US? I then made two research hypotheses. The first one states that interpretation of non-recognition (by both de facto states as well as recognised actors) depends on both the internal situation in the de facto state and the wider geopolitical context in which it exists. The second states that interpretation of non-recognition (by both de facto states as well as recognised actors) shapes their interaction: the foreign policy of de facto state, counter-recognition strategies of the parent state, support of the patron and engagement by the international community. The third hypothesis, which has remained implicit throughout much of my research, has become more obvious during my fieldwork and can be stated in this way: Abkhazia (and I believe this can be generalised to most other de facto states as well), faces a security dilemma regarding both its parent and patron state: What has it gained if it wrested the territory from the parent state (Georgia) but lost its de facto independence to its patron (Russia), if it gained physical security, but lost its ontological security in the process?

2008 War can be explained with Russia having a much stronger interest in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as part of its 'near abroad' than either the US or the EU. Additionally, the US interest in the Caucasus has been of much more practical nature and largely limited to energy (acquiring access to Azerbaijani oil) and security (supply logistics related to the War in Afghanistan, anti-terrorism, equipping and training of the Georgian military). Thirdly, while the Russian and the EU interests in Abkhazia are more diversified and could both be analysed along the plane of culture/identity and geopolitics/interest, after a literature review, one gets an impression that Russia is predominantly a Realpolitik actor and the EU a normative actor. Due to that perceived imbalance, I strove to focus on the under-analysed 'other side' of both actors, focusing on how Russian culture, history, and identity informed its foreign policy towards Abkhazia and looking at EU's engagement with Abkhazia from the vantage point of EU's geopolitical interests in the region.

As I stated in Chapter 1, the scholarship on de facto states has hitherto not explored the issues of state identity and the meaning of (non-)recognition at great depth. They were mostly taken for granted although their unpacking is crucial for understanding the interplay between identity and interaction. While the physical security cannot be overestimated as a concern for de facto states and geopolitical interests cannot be overestimated as drivers of great power competition in the Eurasian borderlands, I believe that the literature on de facto states has so far largely neglected the fact that de facto states are unrecognised by virtue of interpretation – even stigmatisation. The way they are perceived, conceptualised, and interpreted shapes the way they are interacted with. As existing approaches were unsatisfactory, I introduced my own conceptual framework composed of state identity, ontological security and geopolitical role which I operationalised into analytical categories and used during process tracing and elite interviews. I have already hinted at some answers in the empirical chapters and in the preceding section while presenting the key insights from my research. In this section, I draw on philosophical and psychological theory to not only help make sense of and interpret the empirical results but also construct bridges between different theoretical concepts ('thick' and 'thin' recognition, for instance)¹⁹² and perspectives (constructivism and realism). Drawing on Hegel, who introduced the notion of 'recognition' into Western thought, and on Laing who coined the term 'ontological security', this represents a hermeneutical movement between the empirical context and back to the roots of the concepts I use. Both thinkers have developed their respective concepts in complex contexts that have later been marginalized or their concepts have been analytically reduced. Returning to the original expositions serves the purpose of performing a synthesis – in the case of Hegel between social and legal recognition, and in the case of Laing between the ontological security of the person and the state.

¹⁹² Fabry (2017, 24) makes a distinction between thin and thick recognition in this way: "Thin' or 'legal' recognition refers to the external acknowledgment of a subject having a specific formal status or personality within a community of law, whereas 'thick' or 'social' recognition refers to the outside acknowledgment of particular non-formal character, standing, rank, or position within a larger social setting. Recognition of the corporate identity as a state is a former type of recognition, recognition of the national identity of a people a latter type."

The self-fulfilling prophecy of mis-recognition and objectification

International legal recognition and (mis-)recognition in international relations are, as has been suggested in the Introduction, different phenomena but the difference is, I argue in this section, in degree not in kind. De facto states studies have so far largely ignored the literature on ‘thick’, social recognition at its peril. Daase (2015, 3) makes a direct link between (mis)recognition and interaction: “‘Recognition’, or its negative counterpart, ‘misrecognition’, is relevant wherever people or their collective organizations interact – or fail to interact. Individuals and collective political actors seek recognition of certain qualities, positive characteristics, competencies, achievements, or of their status within a specific group of people, a society, a political system, or the international political realm.” Although social rather than legal recognition is meant here, we can connect (non-)recognition and engagement in the same way as both depend on perception of the status and qualities of the individual or state in question. In fact, social recognition precedes legal recognition in sense that recognizing a state as unviable, dependent, criminal, and irresponsible can prevent it from legally recognizing it as independent. This is even more likely when a state is not only stigmatised but objectified, depersonalised and stripped of agency – which is what I examine in this section.

While legal recognition is preoccupied with status, ignoring identity and interaction, social recognition is only interested in identity and interaction, and takes no interest in legal status. The first operates on the international level, while the other operates on almost exclusively national or sub-national level.¹⁹³ It would, however be wrong to see the two recognitions as complete opposites. Daase (2015, 16) suggests “that recognition should be conceived of as a gradual process. Recognition and non-recognition are not clear-cut alternatives but occur in complex and entangled forms and constitute two poles on a long continuum of policies and outcomes. This continuum runs from highly formalized to extremely

¹⁹³ “While much of the politics of recognition has focused on minority cultures and immigrant groups, there has been little investigation of recognition beyond the borders of the liberal state whence those groups originated. What international recognition could and should mean is very much an open question” (McBride & Seglow 2009, 11).

informal modes of recognition, and from the recognition of non-state actors and other political collectives as legitimate negotiating partners to the recognition of entities as sovereign states and as states with specific entitlements” (Daase et al. 2015,16). Legal and social recognition are not completely distinct poles, but part of the same continuum. Similarly, legal recognition itself is not a binary category, but a spectrum. Abkhazia is not completely unrecognised in either sense – it has acquired some legal recognitions and established some routinized forms of interaction outside the official confines of diplomatic relations. Given that legal and social recognition are part of the same spectrum, it is not surprising that policy makers themselves conflate the two. In several interviews, Abkhaz policy-makers complained that their Western interlocutors “think” or “pretend” that “we do not exist”. This begs the question whether the EU policy-makers, for instance, really believe that or that the Abkhaz merely think the Europeans perceive them as such. What matters is that the way Abkhazia is (not) engaged, importantly shapes its perception, identity, its experience of (non-)recognition, and the (non-)recogniser.

Recognition is much more ambiguous than it seems. Although it has a positive meaning, it can have negative consequences for the one on which it is bestowed. If a witness recognises someone as a murderer in the courtroom, the latter can get convicted. Recognition can result in “a misconstruing of the self or a reification of a fixed and putative identity, instead of liberation or progress. Hence, recognition is also a technology of social differentiation that establishes layers of legitimacy and social hierarchies” (Daase et al. 2015, 8). Both recognition and misrecognition can have positive and negative consequences, the difference is in intent – recognition is always done in good and misrecognition in bad faith. Broers (2015, 2), who is one of the few scholars of de facto states that has considered the wider implications of (mis)recognition, claims that “beyond non-recognition, both the detractors and advocates of de facto states in the post-Soviet space engage vigorously in a politics of mis-recognition, inviting audiences to mis-recognise these spaces as something they are not, or are only to partial, arguable and variable extents.” Russia, which has recognised Abkhazia, closely engages with it to the extent that the latter fears becoming overdependent. Georgia, from which Abkhazia seceded, engages (and often mis-engages) with

a mixture of threats and incentives aiming at future re-incorporation. The EU and the US exhibit non-engagement, engagement, and mis-engagement in their attempt to resolve the conflict, implicitly or explicitly in favour of maintaining Georgia's territorial integrity.

Examples of mis-recognition of Abkhazia goes back to 1990s, when it was, along with other post-Soviet de facto states, seen a criminal zone or a warlord-run black hole. Although the perceptions have changed, attempts to mis-recognise and thus stigmatise it, have been made repeatedly, most obviously by employing the term 'occupied territories'. Such objectification or reification is at the core of international community's (non-)engagement of de facto states. They are seen as 'objects' and parts of another state and not as 'subjects' representing a whole unit and possessing individual agency. In this sense, we can understand ontological insecurity as an existential anxiety of being viewed as an object – of being denied not just legal recognition, but all recognition and with it the right to exist. Objectification impedes engagement and the (largely unconscious) dilemma of engagement without recognition is: how to engage with an actor without losing sight of the fact that it is really an object, an occupied territory or at best a breakaway entity? Is engaging with an 'occupied territory'¹⁹⁴ not akin to speaking to someone's doll? For Laing, the schizoid vocabulary of psychiatry produces not only diagnoses but creates split personalities. In a similar way, the objectifying,¹⁹⁵ depersonalising, othering and stigmatizing vocabulary not only produces unrecognised states, but creates isolated, ontologically insecure, and dependent actors. The stigmatizing diagnoses (unrecognised state) becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: treating an actor as if completely dependent and isolating them eventually drives the actor towards dependence (in the case of Abkhazia on Russia), even against resistance (in case of Abkhazia exhibited roughly in the period 2008-2010 when multi-vector foreign policy and expressly stated willingness to engage served to showcase its actorness and demanded to be

¹⁹⁴ While most scholars have taken issue with the 'occupied' part of 'occupied territory', which downplays Abkhazia's agency and paints it as fully dependent if not for all intents and purposes absorbed into Russia – I believe the term "territory" is much more noxious as it implies not a downplaying of agency but a complete lack of subjectivity.

¹⁹⁵ Later in the book, Laing (2010, 46) calls "petrification" the specific kind of objectification "where one negates the other person's autonomy, ignores its feelings, regards him as a thing." This seems even more appropriate for states, as petrification literally turns a state into a rock/territory.

treated as a subject). Laing (2010, 23) notes that “people who experience themselves as automata, as robots, as bits of machinery, or even as animals” are “rightly regarded as crazy” but asks “why do we not regard a theory that seeks to transmute persons into automata or animals equally crazy?” Why is it not legitimate to exist without recognition, but legitimate for recognised actors to reproduce the notion that non-recognition equals non-existence discursively (stigmatization) and behaviourally (isolation)?

Depersonalisation and indifference are quite distinct however. In the words of Laing (2010, 76), “the depersonalized person can be used, manipulated, acted upon /.../ A person minus subjectivity can still be important. A thing can still matter a great deal. Indifference denies to persons and to things their significance.” The difference between depersonalization and indifference reminds us of the difference between mis-recognition and non-recognition in Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectics. Depersonalisation is a form of mis-recognition that serves to subjugate, while indifference is a form of non-recognition that serves to exclude or isolate. I argue that Georgia treats Abkhazia with depersonalization and the US discursively adopts the same approach, however both the EU and the US treat Abkhazia with a mixture of both. The actors who treat Abkhazia with complete ignorance/indifference, are the states and international organisations which have never had any interactions with it. We can assume that to be the majority of the international community. Despite Abkhaz grievances against the West, EU and US engagement serves a vital function in holding a mirror to Abkhazia for it to observe its existence. Mystification of de facto states further serves to cover up their agency: “In order for transpersonal invalidation to work [...] it is advisable to overlay it with a thick patina of mystification” (Laing 1990, 31). They are not subjects with their own experiences, but objects to be experienced. For instance, Soviet Tours, a travel agency specialized for post-Soviet packaged tours that mostly caters to a more adventurous type of traveler, uses these words in describing its Abkhazian tours: little-known, remote, secretive, unusual, magical (Soviet Tours website).

Reading Laing, it seems that we only need to substitute “person” for “state”, “body” and “biological” with “territory” and “territorial” and he is talking of de facto

states – their struggles for recognition, their struggles with ontological insecurity. When he discusses a child at birth, he might as well have been talking about a new state being born and its struggles for recognition – of being born not only biologically (having its own territory) but also existentially:

“There it is, a new baby, a new biological entity, already with its own ways, real and alive, from our point of view. But what of the baby’s point of view? Under usual circumstances, the physical birth of a new living organism into the world inaugurates rapidly ongoing processes whereby within an amazingly short time the infant feels real and alive and has a sense of being an entity, with continuity of location and space. In short, physical birth and biological aliveness are followed by the baby becoming existentially born as real and alive. Usually this development is taken for granted and affords the certainty upon which all other certainties depend. This is to say, not only do adults see children to be real biologically viable entities but they experience themselves as whole persons who are real and alive” (Laing 2010, 41).

The situation of the de facto state is inverse: it is convinced that it exists but is faced with the denial and ignorance of others. This reminds one of an old Lacanian joke often retold by Žižek in his lectures, about a man admitted to a mental institution for believing that he is a seed of grain. After a lengthy but ultimately successful therapy, he is released but returns the next day, shaking and obviously terrified. He tells the doctor that a chicken is after him to which the doctor responds: “But now you know that you are not a seed of grain”. The man, unphased by the doctor’s reply, responds: “Yes, of course. But does the chicken know that?” De facto states face the same dilemma: they laboriously and ostentatiously engage in state-building to assure themselves and others that they are indeed states but after an ultimately long and successful process, when faced with the outside world, are faced with the hungry chicken which is not convinced of their statehood. It does not matter here if the hungry chicken who believes that the individual in question is a seed (or an aggressive state that seeks to re-incorporate a breakaway territory and believes it does not really exist apart from itself) really exists or is a product of the individual’s/de facto state’s imagination.

As the Thomas theorem states, things individuals believe in, are real in their consequences. In an ontologically insecure actor, a chicken with an open beak or a talk about liberating the 'occupied territories' – even if not intended as a threat – might produce a sense of fear and anxiety. This eventually manifests in siege mentality and reluctance to interact with actors that tend to down play its agency – which is then conveniently interpreted as lack of agency.

Ontological security and its defence mechanisms

R.D. Laing's basic purpose was, in his own words: "to make madness, and the process of going mad, comprehensible" (Laing 2010, 9). In a similar vein, my purpose is to make seemingly irrational decisions of Abkhazia,¹⁹⁶ and the process of arriving at them, comprehensible. That is, not to rationalize and explain them away, but to understand their inner logic, why and how they come about. To do so, I first discuss Abkhazia's ontological security dilemma and then analyse how it tries to preserve its ontological security through 1) the defence mechanisms of maintaining routines, and the 'sour grapes' - ambition management for the preservation of honour; 2) preserving the identity of the Abkhaz nation by building an ethnocracy domestically; and 3) playing geopolitical roles to avoid the extremes of isolation and overdependence. I look at 1) and 2) in this section and 3) in the context of interaction between isolation and overdependence in the next.

According to Laing (2010, 39), ontological security is: "a sense of /.../ presence in the world as real, alive, whole and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person." An ontologically secure person will "encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity" (Laing 2010, 39).¹⁹⁷ According to Laing (2010, 37),

¹⁹⁶ One such decision that is often seen as irrational, is Abkhazia's insistence to engage on its own terms and on an equal footing. From a perspective that looks at Abkhazia through a prism of mis-recognition, objectification, and stigma, the decision is absurd as 'beggars can't be choosers'. Abkhaz delegation's protest departure from the GID or Abkhazia's turning down a Chinese investment are only seen as irrational in an irrational gaze.

¹⁹⁷ This understanding is very close to the stoic attitude (often conceptualized by ethical but as much ontological) to life and the ability to cope with whatever it throws at us. What is equally important here, is that ontological security is conceptualized as personal and interpersonal: "sense of his own and other people's reality and identity." Later in this chapter, I make an argument that it would make more sense to conceptualize this interpersonal sense of reality as part of *epistemological security*.

a “truth” about an “existential position” is “lived out”. In this sense, de facto states are existentialist subjects through their ‘lived experience’ of ‘being in-the-world’. In Laing’s (2010, 40) analysis of Kafka’s *The Process*,¹⁹⁸ “long before the sentence is executed, even long before the malign legal process is even instituted, something terrible has been done to the accused /.../ he has been stripped of all that is becoming to a man except his abstract humanity, which like a skeleton, never is quite becoming to a man. He is without parents, home, wife, child, commitment, or appetite; he has no connection with power, beauty, love, wit, courage, loyalty, or fame, and the pride that may be taken in these.” Have de facto states not been subjected to the same treatment even before the legal process (of conflict resolution negotiations) has been instituted? Stripped of all that is becoming to a state, depersonalized and objectified, denied not only statehood, but actorness. Worse, they were denied a separate identity and with it any ability to express and behave in their own unique way. They were guilty for existing even before the process started.

In such state of “primary ontological insecurity” when there is “partial or almost complete absence of assurances derived from an existential position” and in which “anxieties and dangers” arise (Laing 2010, 39), “the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat” (Laing 2010, 42). An individual who does not feel secure in himself “can no more live in a ‘secure’ world”. In other worlds, to the state, which is not ontologically secure, the world itself also appears hostile and threatening. Left to their own devices, de facto states tend to create their own world by recognizing and establishing relations with other de facto states. Faced with inability to become part of international organizations, they establish and join surrogate organisations, such as the UNPO or CONIFA. According to Laing (2010, 43):

¹⁹⁸ In fact, Laing first mentions instances of ontological insecurity in relation to art (and in particular, literature) rather than in clinical practice: Kafka (*The Process*), Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*). It is also interesting that his first use of the term ontological security is in the negative – ontological insecurity, which is also the title of one of the chapters in *The Divided Self* (2010). It is often easier to define the pathological through symptoms as it is to point out the characteristics of the normal, it seems easier to show how lack of ontological security looks like then how an ontologically secure state does. In fact, we rarely think of security from the position of security; for most actors it becomes an issue only retrospectively after it is gone.

“What are to most people everyday happenings, which are hardly noticed because they have no special significance, may become deeply significant in so far as they either contribute to the sustenance of the individual’s being or threaten him with non-being. Such an individual for whom, the elements of the world are coming to have or have come to have, a different hierarchy of significance from that of the ordinary person, is beginning, as we say, to ‘live in a world of his own’.”

Surrounding themselves with actors that accept them as states and do not impinge on their subjectivity, serves the purpose preserving increasing ontological security through interaction with others: “In the face of being treated as an ‘it’, his own subjectivity drains away from him like blood from the face. Basically he requires constant confirmation from others of his own existence as a person” (Laing 2010, 46–47). This confirmation of existence is sought through routines – or what Smith (2018) has called ‘social moves.’ These may be deprived of any meaningful content or conducted with actors of minor significance to Abkhazia, but they serve as a mirror in which de facto states can see itself as existing in the world.

Another defence mechanism adopted by an isolated, ontologically insecure individual, is to pretend or to convince itself not to want something it does (such as recognition or engagement). It does so because not getting something one has staked their honour to, would compromise its honour and hence ontological security: “The isolation of the self is a corollary, therefore, of the need to be in control. He prefers to steal, rather than to be given. He prefers to give rather than have anything, as he feels, stolen from him; i.e. he has to be in control of who or what comes into him, and of who or what leaves him. This defensive system is elaborated, we suggest, to make up for the primary lack of ontological security” (Laing 2010, 83). Abkhazian policy makers often prefer to pretend not to want recognition than to be seen begging for it. They prefer to reject engagement than risk others stop engaging with them first. Recognition, although mostly stated as the main goal of Abkhaz foreign policy, is often immediately downplayed: “we do not care for recognition of anybody, because we recognise ourselves. To create a state, you do not need international relations” (Interview with Viacheslav

Chirikba). Sour grapes are a way of dealing with contradictory impulses, a vacillation between an object of desire and sense of fatalism. This has roots both in its culture in which preserving honour is extremely important as well as in its precarious international status and its specific existential experience of it.

Non-recognition (both social and legal) is not the only source of ontological insecurity of Abkhazia, but it compounds the perception of Georgia and Russia as threats (discussed below). Furthermore, the Abkhaz feel threatened not only from outside, but also from within – they barely account for half of the population, and even these figures are by the Abkhazian government, so they may be exaggerated. Even worse, the great majority of people in Abkhazia (and many Abkhaz themselves) do not know the Abkhaz language. Ethnocracy has been an ongoing attempt to preserve the bedrock of Abkhaz nationhood.

Interaction between isolation and engulfment

A dilemma de facto states face when they wrest the territory from the parent state but lose their de facto independence to their patron – when they gain security but lose their identity in the process – has been briefly mentioned in the theoretical framework. As can be observed in the empirical chapters and will be elaborated here, this dilemma has been empirically validated and represents the crux of Abkhazia's foreign policy, which has vacillated between the strategies of multi-vector foreign policy and patron reliance, and the defence mechanism of self-isolation. The choice of the strategy depends on domestic and international factors, often difficult to disentangle in de facto states where the borders between 'inside' and 'outside' are more effaced. According to Laing (2010, 44), "a firm sense of one's own autonomous identity is required in order that one may be related as one human being to another. Otherwise, any and every relationship threatens the individual with loss of identity. One form this takes can be called engulfment. In this the individual dreads relatedness as such, with anyone or anything or, indeed, even with himself, because his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy lays him open to the dread lest in any relationship he will lose his autonomy and identity." Abkhazia's fear of Russia and their close – at times too close and smothering – relationship of dependence demonstrates this fear of

engulfment. To quote Laing (2010, 404) further: “The main maneuver used to preserve identity under pressure from the dread of engulfment is isolation. Thus, instead of the polarities of separateness and relatedness based on individual autonomy, there is the antithesis between complete loss of being by absorption into the other person (engulfment), and complete aloneness (isolation)” (Laing 2010, 44).

This is the dilemma faced by Abkhazia in relation to Russia: either rely on Russia for physical security and become engulfed ontologically or self-isolate and make itself vulnerable to future Georgian attempts (with tacit support of the international community) to re-integrate it. This dilemma tends to become more acute as it is cast in Manichean terms: “the polarity is between complete isolation or complete merging of identity rather than between separateness and relatedness” (Laing 2010, 53). Either Abkhazia be an ignored outcast or face the disappearance of its identity (either by being overly dependent on Russia and gradually Russified or by being re-incorporated into Georgia and Georganised). These are not fictional scenarios as the Abkhaz have been subject to both Russification and Georgianisation before (see historical context in Chapter 2). When diversification of relations is possible, such as in the 2008-2010 window, Abkhazia has been keen to pursue it as a strategy of avoiding engulfment. When, however, this option is not available, compromising with the parent state or isolation are the only other options. As the first one is often untenable for domestic political reasons, isolation is all what was left to Abkhazia through much of the 1990s, when Russia was largely supportive of Georgia and Abkhazia remained effectively without a patron state, under a Russian embargo into the 2000s.

Richards & Smith (2015, 175) argue that non-recognition and isolation can have benefits and act as a “sandbox”, providing “the space and flexibility for states to develop institutions and nations, identities, and capabilities, before being surrounded by the complications and responsibilities of recognised statehood.” Isolation, although not the first choice, is often an instinctive one – a safe space a de facto withdraws into to regain its resilience: “isolation does force a degree of self-reliance before external engagement is undertaken, creating a possibility of a more resilient state emerging if recognition is granted” (*ibid.*). However, Laing

(2010, 114), who could just as well be talking about de facto states, reminds us that isolation is not sustainable in the long run: “He can be himself in safety only in isolation, albeit with a sense of emptiness and unreality. With others, he plays an elaborate game of pretence and equivocation. His social self is felt to be false and futile. What he longs for most is the possibility of ‘a moment of recognition’.” Attaining Recognition and avoiding overdependence are two goals de facto states strive towards using the strategies of multi-vector foreign policy and, patron reliance, and when none of these is available, resorting to the defence mechanism of self-isolation. I further analyse the functioning of these strategies in the next section by drawing on geopolitical role.

Abkhazia’s geopolitical role: between being and playing a state

De facto states are states. But since they lack international recognition, they are only states for themselves (and perhaps a few recognisers), not for others. Therefore, they are not only states, but they also play at being states. Being something and playing at something differ in the degree of authenticity/falseness. To be is to be in an own way but to play is to play a role – it is to present a stereotypical image of a state. De-facto states can be said to behave in what Sartre described as ‘bad faith’. In other words, when they play at being states, they over-play their role and consequently expose cracks in their statehood.¹⁹⁹ A false self “arises in compliance with the intentions and expectations of the other, or with what are imagined to be the other’s intentions or expectations” (Laing 2010, 98). For instance, immediately after the recognition of Kosovo, Abkhazia was trying to play up its independence, state-building, and democratization efforts as it felt an expectation from the international community (and especially the EU and the US) to present itself as a responsible actor who ‘deserves’ recognition.

¹⁹⁹ Sartre (1993, 167–169) illustrates the concept of bad faith by giving an example of a waiter who tries his best to emulate the behaviour of (other) waiters. His behaviour, rather than appearing natural, seems exaggerated, which is precisely the evidence that he is acting. Another example would be a dictator who tries to present himself as a legitimate leader by rigging elections to win with a majority of over 90%. It is precisely the unbelievably high popularity that undermines our belief in not just his popularity, but also the democratic nature of the regime.

For a state to play a role, however, it needs to have a degree of self-understanding: “The most basic element of a state’s identity is its self-understanding: the domestic conception of the self that arises from domestic discourses and historical experience and determines which role the state wants to play in the international order” (Murray 2015, 70). The reverse is also true, as the Goffman (1990, 30) argued, “everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role...It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.” This completes the circle: self-understanding serves as a basis for identity, the identity the basis for playing roles, through the roles individuals and states come to know and understand and recognise each other. To preserve their ontological security, avoid compromising their honour, becoming isolated or engulfed, they adopt strategies that depend on playing roles etc.²⁰⁰

While discussions of identity, interaction, recognition and narratives may seem far removed from resource-based geopolitical view of international politics of classical realism, Lindemann (2012, 221) points out that “the quest for recognition is often quite strategic and reputation is a resource in the struggle for power.” This is the potential point of constructivist and realist convergence and the point where it is possible to connect recognition-seeking with the concept of the geopolitical role and with strategies of balancing and bandwagoning (Walt 1985). Insistence that de facto states play geopolitical roles instead of just roles, is not an attempt to bring in Realism and materiality into the mix at the last instance but is based on the typology or roles presented in Chapter 1 and the acknowledgment that interpretation of non-recognition depend both on internal factors as well as the geopolitical context. The typology outlined six roles played by de facto states: divider, middle man, tollman, extorter, keeper of the status quo, and emulator. The reason a typology is possible is that roles tend to become established over

²⁰⁰ It is important to note that this is an epistemological and as such a hermeneutical circle. I argue that self-understanding is part of epistemological security and that a state can understand itself well, without others validating this self-understanding through recognition, the state can still be uncertain in its identity and therefore ontologically insecure. The previously quoted example of ostensibly not caring if others recognise Abkhazia, because they recognise themselves could be interpreted both as an extreme example of sour grapes (we cannot be recognised by others so we do not want it and it does not matter for us), but its' also an affirmation of epistemological security (we are sure of our existence, even if others are not – it's not an ontological problem, but an epistemological problem of others who are not able to see us for what we are).

time: “When an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it. Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both” (Goffman 1990, 37). As I have mentioned, each de facto unrecognised state can play different roles at different times or even combine elements of several roles. This is achieved by ‘audience segregation’, which “that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting” (Goffman 1990, 57).

Empirical evidence suggests that Abkhazia played the role of the middle man in 1990s, when isolated and under embargo. This is the role that enabled it to survive through smuggling over the porous Georgian-Abkhaz border, with the help of local elites in Krasnodar region and the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey. This was not a sustainable role as it did not allow for effective audience segregation, leaving Abkhazia with a negative reputation in the West. It also became untenable after the election of Saakashvili in 2004 when initiatives to eradicate, smuggling, black markets and corruption, made the Georgian-Abkhaz border much less permeable. There is some evidence that Abkhazia played the role of extorter vis-à-vis Russia. This role was played more often as a self-defence tactic to what was seen as Russian encroachment on Abkhazia’s independence (when in 2014 the draft Agreements on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support was leaked, forcing a renegotiation, for instance). There is even more evidence of Abkhazia playing the role of the keeper of the status quo in delaying Georgia’s integration in Euro-Atlantic frameworks. As such it is a thorn in Georgia’s foot and a trump card in Russia’s hand. Abkhazia combines the role of keeper of the status quo with the role of the divider most noticeably by hosting Russian military bases, representing a threat to Georgia and forcing it into significant military expenditures. By playing these two roles, it benefits from Russian protection, aid, and investment) in turn for their compliance. Georgia, in trying to convince Abkhazia to abandon this role, is itself providing incentives, such as free healthcare and education across the border. Finally, Abkhazia has all but abandoned its role of emulator, most prominently played in the 2008-2010 period to mimic recognised states and adopt international democracy and human rights

standards in order to gain recognition. This role has been played in front of EU and US interlocutors and audiences but was unsuccessful in achieving desired level of engagement (to say nothing of recognition), while becoming increasingly difficult to hide playing this role from the Russia gaze.

Theoretical contribution

This thesis presents several original theoretical contributions with applicability beyond de facto state studies. The most tangible analytical contribution is my typology of the roles de facto states play, while epistemological security (discussed later in this Chapter) might be the most original avenue of inquiry. The claim to originality of this thesis is based on a reflexive selection of a constructivist theoretical framework, which differs from most earlier studies of de facto states, grounded largely in implicit Realist assumptions.

First, as mentioned in the Introduction, the approach is inspired by Wendt (1999) and novel in adopting a constructivist view of states as persons, examining (non-)recognition not as a given, but as perceived, experienced, and socially constructed - as what states make of it. It is one of the very few studies (in addition to, in minor part Broers 2015 and Chernobrov 2017) that in discussing de facto states draw on both the scholarship on 'thick' recognition in the international relations and the 'thin' legal recognition of states.

Second, while there has been some research on the identity of de facto states, looking at the nexus of identity and foreign policy of de facto states through an honour-centred perspective, is novel. While the field of de facto state studies seems to be going into the direction of large n-studies comparative studies and quantification, this contribution goes against the grain by drawing on ethnographic research (Hewitt 1999, Shesterinina 2014, Costello 2015, Smolnik & Weiss 2017) and producing a thick description of a single case study, which however offers many within-case comparisons.

Third, to the best of the author's knowledge, this research together with previous publications by the author (Jakša 2017), represent the first instance of the application of ontological security perspective to de facto states. An even more

original theoretical contribution is the recognition of the limits of ontological security as an analytical concept and perspective and the proposal for research into epistemological security as a complementary perspective of the constructivist view of international relations (discussed in this chapter in the section Avenues of further inquiry).

Fourth, the thesis defines the concept of geopolitical role and introduces an original typology of geopolitical roles played by de facto states. In adopting and defining the concept of geopolitical role, it builds bridges between realist and constructivist theories of international relations to capture the impact of both internal and external, ideational and material factors that shape the interaction of de facto state with other actors.

Overall the thesis has therefore developed a framework for explaining how non-recognition is interpreted, which helps in understanding how interpretations of non-recognition influence foreign policy interactions between de facto state and recognised actors. The focus on honour in international politics, as well as the ontological and epistemological security of states, and the concept of geopolitical role, arguably extend well beyond de facto state studies with potential applicability for the wider discipline of International Relations.

Generalizability

Drawing on the critical assessment of the explanatory weight of my research from Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, what are the possibilities and limits of generalising my research results? As mentioned in Chapter 2, mine is an embedded nomothetic single case study that seeks to provide a holistic account of Abkhazia's foreign relations but at the same time makes an argument that this explanatory framework can be extended to foreign relations of other de facto states and the de facto state foreign policy as such. I have argued that Abkhazia, although in no way a typical case, shares some traits with other de facto states, enabling a certain level of generalizability of conclusions.

My research has a high degree of internal generalizability due to triangulated data from various sources (elite interviews in Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia, EU

institutions, and the US) that capture the empirical reality from various sides and angles. An example is my finding that Abkhaz foreign policy has shown to be surprisingly pro-active, especially in the period 2008-2010. This goes against most scholarly accounts of Abkhazia (often depicted as passively dependant on Russia) and against my own expectations. Yet, the fact that it was observed in interviews with both EU and US policy-makers, as well as more directly evidenced by the people involved in representing Abkhazia in the US, effectively establishes a basis for such generalisation. As mentioned in Chapter 3, a degree of standardisation of the research situations provided additional validity for such triangulations.

Experiences of non-recognition and the vacillation between fatalism and sour grapes, can be generalised as they are more than individual experiences and closer to being existential truths of the way de facto states (particularly the ones with no or few recognitions) are in the world. I would expect de facto states as different as Western Sahara and Somaliland to share this experience, but most likely not Taiwan, which is prosperous and has extensive foreign relations. The precondition for this vacillation, however, is a genuine desire for independence and although I would still expect to find it in Nagorno-Karabakh or the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, it is probably not as strongly pronounced as in Abkhazia. Furthermore, concerns with ontological security are not something particular to Abkhazia (although they might be more acutely pronounced in its case) but to an extent inherent in the triangular relationship between de facto state, its parent and patron states. Especially when the relationship between the parent state and the de facto state are very bad, when the patron state is much stronger than the parent state and borders the de facto state, concerns of overdependence may arise. I would expect Transnistrian policy makers to feel more ontologically secure both because they have a more workable relationship with Moldova (and through it access to the European markets) and because they do not border Russia.

Among the least generalisable results are the ones concerning the culture and identity of Abkhazia. *Apswara* importantly shapes the perspectives of Abkhaz and no other policy-makers, but a general argument can be made for honour to play

a greater role in more isolated, traditional societies in mountainous regions. Although culturally distinct, we can expect that Abkhazian policy-makers share several common traits with policy-makers in Chechnya but not that many with the ones in South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. It is also not possible to generalise any findings related to domestic politics of Abkhazia, such as the diversity in views of foreign policy among policy-makers. As this is probably closely related to the level of plurality and democratic expression of a society, I would expect to find much more uniform views among South Ossetian political elites.

As I have discussed in Chapter 3, I have made a conscious choice not to make external generalisability of results the ultimate goal of my research and to focus instead on a thorough and multi-sided account of Abkhazia's foreign interactions. Given that fact, I believe that the generalisations I was able to make are valid and contribute to the wider field of de facto state studies. In this sense, perhaps the greatest contribution is my typology of geopolitical roles (introduced in Chapter 1 and applied to Abkhazia in this chapter) of de facto states that I believe covers the most important behavioural patterns of de facto states.

Policy relevance

The practical contribution of the thesis is its relevance for policy makers. Despite this not being the primary goal of this research project, the results nevertheless have some policy relevance.

First, understanding de facto states as a *sui generis* international actor and a semi-permanent fixture of the international system rather than as a temporal and spatial exception to it, helps not only in understanding the ongoing political fragmentation of the international system, but also reaffirms the need for conflict resolution. It is likely that most de facto states will continue to exist in the short- and medium-term, making it necessary to devise ways of dealing with them. Understanding their identity, culture, the security anxieties and policy dilemmas arising from their existential situation, can lead to better engagement and conflict resolution policies.

Second, they show the importance of the use of language and the negative impact of mis-recognition and objectification that can act as self-fulfilling prophecies. De facto states are still seen in predominantly negative terms and the language that criminalises them ('illegal', 'occupied') only serves to further entrench this stigma. If actors want to avoid de facto states becoming increasingly dependent on their patrons, they could start with revising the vocabulary that strips them of their agency.

Finally, engagement, even if not very extensive or meaningful, positively affects the agency of de facto states and their ontological security. Engagement is especially important in cases when honour plays an important role in the identity of a de facto state and when legal recognition and social recognition are conflated. There is little evidence to justify the fear of engagement turning into a 'creeping recognition'. Engagement needs to make use of the opportunities when political elites in a de facto state are keen on de-isolating the entity or diversifying its foreign relations. If the opportunity is missed, pressures from the patron, domestic political change, fatalism and sour grapes can push the de facto state into self-isolation or overdependence on the patron.

Limitations

As every doctoral thesis, this was an iterative process with limitations arising both due to the necessity to maintain focus (limited scope) and the unpredictable nature of fieldwork (data shortcomings). I shortly outline the two and assess their bearing on the thesis.

Limitations of scope

In Chapter 2, I have defined the empirical scope of my research as a single case-study of Abkhazia's relations with Russia, the EU, and the US between 12th October 1999 (when the Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia was signed and entered into force) and November 24th, 2014 (when the Russian-Abkhaz 'Agreement on Alliance and Strategic Partnership' was signed). The topical/spatial focus of a single-case study meant leaving out comparisons with

other de facto state (those with South Ossetia being the most obvious) beyond those immediately relevant to the case of Abkhazia. As mentioned, this reduced the external generalisability but enabled the within-case comparison of Abkhazia's foreign relations with higher internal generalisability and validity (possibility of triangulation of interview data from different interlocutors). The temporal focus on the 1999-2014 period proved a sensible one, although doing research on and making references to earlier periods, especially between September 1993 (end of Georgian-Abkhaz War) and October 1999, proved to be unavoidable. Extending the time-frame to an earlier date would likely reveal important details about the transformation of Abkhazian identity in and immediately after the Georgian-Abkhaz War and during the period when it existed in effective isolation and without a patron state. Extending the time-frame closer to now could consider important events and processes, such as the consolidation of the pro-Kremlin Khajimba government, increasing dependence on Russia and the recognition of Abkhazia by Syria in 2018. While both extensions would add to the thesis, they would not fundamentally change the argument, or the trends observed in the key findings.

Limitations of data

In terms of the limitations of fieldwork and the data collected, the most important was the relatively few interviews I was able to obtain from Russian policy-makers, most of who also refused to speak on record. I consider it very telling that Russian policy-makers seemed reluctant to talk to me. As explained in Chapter 3, I attribute this fact to political reasons (bad relations between Russia and the EU). The Abkhaz Embassy in Moscow was especially difficult to reach, postponing and eventually cancelling my appointment. Nevertheless, I did manage to get two interviews with MFA officials and another two off-record. The relative lack of data from Russia was compensated by drawing on other, mostly documentary, sources. Luckily, due to the existence of formal diplomatic relations between Abkhazia and Russia, these were accessible. There were other smaller limitations, such as failure to obtain interviews from two important interviewees: Sergei Shamba, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia 1997-2004 and 2004-2010, and Peter Semneby, the EU Special Representative for the South

Caucasus 2006-2011. Access to policy-makers during fieldwork is unpredictable and it is rarely possible to speak to everyone on the list. Luckily other sources in the Abkhazian MFA, the EU Delegation to Georgia, and the EEAS compensated for this gap. The insights of these interviewees would add important detail to the thesis, but it is not likely that they would fundamentally change its argument or key findings.

Avenues of further inquiry

The research undertaken for this thesis can be extended into several directions. However, as it was impossible to pursue several of these threads in the thesis, it is also impossible to name and discuss all the possible avenues of further inquiry. Therefore, I briefly mention a few of these potential trajectories and then discuss in more detail one such avenue – epistemological security.

The methodology and its key concepts (state identity, ontological security, and geopolitical role) can be applied to other case studies of de facto states or used to compare the cases. In relation to this, examining the role honour plays in the foreign policy of some de facto states and recognised actors, would further the motive of this thesis to explain seemingly irrational foreign policy decisions. Further ethnographic work on the role of *apswara* in Abkhazia today is also a promising avenue to gaining a deeper understanding of the policy-makers' habitus. Another way of furthering this project would be to look at Abkhazia's other significant relations (which had to be kept at a minimum or wholly omitted here) based on diasporic (Turkey) or kinship (North Caucasus) ties.

As discussed in Chapter 1, ontological security is fairly recent but valuable perspective and its application has proven to bear fruit in its application in this research. However, it does have some limitations, which have become increasingly clear throughout the research process. In my opinion, the most important of these limitations that has hitherto not been addressed, is the fact that ontological security often tends to cover – and fails to distinguish between – both *ontological security* and what I call *epistemological security*. If ontological security is the security of identity (the internal self), then epistemological security can be

conceptualised as the security of the knowledge about the environment and different actors (the external other). The current definitions of ontological security do not make this distinction, defining it as a “sense of continuity and order in events” (Giddens 1991, 243), while ontological insecurity “refers to the deep, incapacitating state of not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore, i.e. how to get by in the world” (Mitzen 2006, 345). I therefore propose a separate but complementary concept of epistemological security that can be defined as the state of having confidence in an accurate perception of reality, the validity of your knowledge, and the methods to acquire and process information.²⁰¹ Epistemological security can be defined as security of knowledge. If the environment changes quickly, epistemological security may be threatened.²⁰²

The perspective of epistemological security has wide applicability, including the potential to further the explanatory power of ontological (in)security of de facto states. Their international isolation also means that they are often in the dark; they have limited means and opportunities to access information, analyse and interpret it. Due to the lack of exposure to current trends in technology, medicine, education, but also social sciences (IR, government, public policy), they are falling behind. This has nothing to do with their identity but with the insecurity of being cut off from sources of information and interactions as ways of obtaining knowledge about the international environment they inhabit. Abkhazia's over-reliance on Russia represents a threat to its epistemological security on the level of the population (complete dependence on Russian, and especially, state TV media) and the decision-makers (educated in Moscow and most frequently

²⁰¹ *Epistemological security* should be distinguished from *epistemic security*. Epistemological security is about preserving a unique world view, perception, and grasp of the world. Epistemic security, when applied to the issue of the state and politics, is about the security of sensitive, classified, and secret information. Similarly, a difference between *ontological* and *ontic* security could be introduced. While ontological security is about preserving the self-identity (values, norms, identity as a nation, people and state) and is directed inwards, ontic security is about preserving an identity of a state and is directed outwards.

²⁰² A good concrete example of a difference between ontological security and epistemological insecurity are critical situations *after* a major terrorist attack, like the November 2015 Paris attacks or the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings. It is in the aftermath of these events that *fear* (as an emotion with an object - terrorist attacks) can increase, but *anxiety* (as an emotion without object) generally does not. In fact, the identity is often strengthened, and values revitalised as the community rallies around the flag. Ontological security increases. However, the failure to *predict* and stop the attack casts doubt on the ability of intelligence services, police, judiciary, and even education and social systems (who failed to *prevent* – integrate and socialize – the would-be perpetrators) on detecting radicalisation and foiling terrorist plots.

interact with Russians). Abkhazians, although possessing a unique culture, identity and *Weltanschauung* of international politics, perceive events through the filter of Russian habitus maintained through Russian education and Russian media dominance. Their ontological security in the sense of a separate and unique identity is not threatened, but their separate and unique view of the world is. Furthermore, having no embassies and consulates around the world means having no eyes and ears to perceive reality on the ground and access information first-hand. Among other functions, the diplomatic network also serves to gather information and intelligence, including through legal means (by military attaches, for example) and illegal means (industrial espionage, for example). Being largely unrecognised, de facto states lack this network. Having no representation in the parent state means not being able to gather reliable information about possible military threats (invasion with the intention to re-incorporate the breakaway entity and re-establish territorial integrity) on their own. Consequently, lacking facts that would justify *specific fear* (of a concrete threat) they tend to exist in a state of *general anxiety*, which results in siege mentality.

Conclusion

This last chapter represents a synthesis that brought together theoretical, methodological and empirical components of the thesis, drawing on all previous chapters. As such, this chapter constructed from the partial views of previous chapters a more complete and coherent view of Abkhazia's foreign interactions to re-assess the main argument, in the light of key findings, and to answer the research questions. The chapter also discussed theoretical contributions, the potential and limits to generalisability of the findings, its policy relevance, limitations and some avenues of further inquiry.

The research questions were answered with the help of the three hypotheses, all of which were confirmed in the process: 1) interpretation of non-recognition depends on both the internal situation in the de facto state and the wider geopolitical context in which it exists; 2) interpretation of non-recognition shapes interaction: foreign policy of de facto state; 3) Abkhazia faces a security dilemma regarding both its parent and patron state. To interpret the results, I drew on

philosophical and psychological theory, reexamining the empirical findings in the light of going back to the roots of recognition and ontological security. I explored the role mis-recognition and objectification play in reducing the agency of Abkhazia and other de facto states, and how they may lead to non-recognition becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Further exploring this from the perspective of the de facto state, I focused on its ontological security and the ways it tries to preserve it – both through strategies and through defence mechanisms. The crux of the ontological security dilemma faced by Abkhazia was identified in the interaction between isolation and engulfment and the geopolitical role presented as a model of how de facto states try to manage this double threat by both being and playing a state.

The thesis presented several theoretical contributions. It examined (non-)recognition not as a given, but as perceived, experienced, and socially constructed - as what states make of it. The nexus of identity and foreign policy of de facto states was analysed through a novel, honour-centred perspective, for the first time applying the perspective of ontological security to de facto states. Furthermore, the research discussed the limits of ontological security and introduced the complementary concept of epistemological security. It presented an original typology of geopolitical roles played by de facto states, capturing the internal and external, ideational and material factors, and building bridges between realist and constructivist theories of international relations.

Despite not making external generalisability the main goal of the thesis, several valid generalisations pertaining to existential situation of the way de facto states (fatalism, sour grapes, ontological security dilemma) and their being-in-the-world. The typology of geopolitical roles covers the most important foreign policy behaviours of de facto states and has wide applicability.

The thesis helps inform policy debates by analysing de facto states as semi-permanent fixtures of a fragmenting international system. Understanding their specific existential experience of non-recognition, their ontological anxieties, avoiding stigmatising and agency-downplaying language, can lead to better engagement and more successful conflict resolution.

Limitations to this research are primarily those of scope and data. While extending the scope in terms of cases and time-frame, would add to the thesis, it would not fundamentally change its argument. Similarly, the gaps in data were addressed with the help of other sources and while the missing interviews would add detail to the thesis, they would not significantly affect the argument.

Several avenues of further inquiry were proposed, such as the application of the theoretical framework to other cases, analysing Abkhazia's other significant relations, and further examining the role of honour and *apswara*. The most important avenue, with wide applicability, is the proposed concept of epistemological security, which would address the limitations of ontological security and in conjunction with it provide a stronger explanatory framework.

Conclusion

“Sometimes we don't do things we want to do
so that others won't know we want to do them.”
– The Village (2004)

This thesis has examined how interpretations of non-recognition influence the formulation and implementation of foreign policy objectives and strategies. The research focused on the period between October 1999 and November 2014, employing process-tracing and interviews with policy-makers in Abkhazia and the actors it engages with – Russia, the EU, and the US. By virtue of its design, the research's claim to contribute to the existing literature rests on presenting the first multi-sided account of foreign policy interaction of a *de facto* state. Employing a constructivist theoretical framework, non-recognition was explored not as a given but as experienced, suggesting that it is what states (including *de facto* states) make of it.

In the Introduction, *de facto* states in the international system were likened to shards that have fallen from a broken 17th century mirror. This thesis has shown that Abkhazia is a shard that reflects other shards and the broken mirror itself in several ways. The reflection changed with the change of perspective. As this thesis demonstrates, *apswara* importantly shapes the perspectives of Abkhaz policy-makers while comparative categories act as mirrors and play a large role in sustaining ontological security, regardless of the intensity and meaningfulness of interaction. Abkhazian policy-makers, who vacillate between a sense of fatalism and sour grapes are heavily dependent on Russian media, which acts as their perception filter. Non-recognition is like a black mirror that offers no reflection. In addition to being one of the important constraining factors (alongside the lack of strategy, dependence on Russia, and the lack of resources), it acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. As such, it limits the goals, expectations and confidence of policy-makers, contributing to a shift from the main goal of obtaining recognition to short-term objectives (such as fostering trade). In a room with a mirror covering the whole wall, it is sometimes hard to distinguish the reflection from what it

reflects. It is similarly difficult to tell apart the 'inside' and 'outside' of de facto states as foreign relations often become the matter of domestic politics and the other way around. Abkhazian interviewees were keen to stress that Abkhazia has "its own course", separate from Russia's, but disagreed on what this course should be, suggesting that beneath the glass and out of our gaze, this shard is further cracked and split internally. The perspective of ontological security and the concept of honour were found to be especially relevant in analysing the foreign policies of Abkhazia and Russia but not as much in the cases of the EU and the US, suggesting that insistence on reciprocity and mirroring of respect is more important for aspiring than for established actors.

The key dilemma for Abkhazian policy-makers now and for the foreseeable future is how to balance Russian influence by interacting with other international actors. The increasing dependence is a threat to Abkhazia's ontological security through self-perception and the blending of identities. In both cases, the ontological anxiety is one of no longer recognizing itself in the mirror. Despite feeling anxious about Russia (largely supportive of Georgia through 1990s when Abkhazia remained without a patron), Russian policy-makers better understand the symbolic weight that recognition (and conflation of legal and social recognition) carries for the Abkhazians than do the EU and US policy-makers. The latter differ significantly in their interests in Abkhazia, which largely mirror their interests in South Caucasus as a whole. My research shows that Abkhazia was much more proactive in pursuing its foreign policy goals than is often assumed, especially between 2008 and 2010, a period of missed opportunities for engagement. Surprisingly, as the chances of conflict resolution decreased, EU and US engagement increased, boosting Abkhazia's foreign policy confidence in the short run. International engagement was constrained by both Russia and Georgia, the shortcomings of EU and US approaches, the emergence of more pressing international issues, and finally the language that isolated and stigmatised Abkhazia, downplayed its agency, contributing to its increasing dependence on Russia.

Looking at Abkhazia, a reflection of other actors could be seen. When looked at Russia, the EU or the US, they in turn reflected back on Abkhazia. In both cases,

glimpses of the international community, its hierarchies and norms could be caught. It is customary in research to proceed inductively, from specific facts towards more universal conclusions. This has also been the case for *facto states* studies, which has, in slightly more than two decades, run the full course of the development of a field. From first tentative attempts to make sense of these *enfants terribles* of the international community, put them on the lowest common denominator, and define them, the field has come to produce wide-ranging scholarship on many dimensions of the particular existential situation *de facto states* find themselves in...except perhaps the existential situation itself and their experience of it.²⁰³ This is not to suggest the abandonment of the parts for the whole in the shape of some higher truth. Just the opposite: to find the general in the specific, the system reflected in one of its shards. Hegel always sought the universal in the particular, famously deriving his dialectical method from the observation of the stages of a blooming flower in the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977, 2). However, with Hegel things are always in flux and the universal soon loses itself in a thousand different fragments. It is therefore fitting to complement the introductory and general metaphor with the following concluding and specific parallel.

In Manoj Nelliyattu Shyamalan's 2004 film *The Village*, the population of the eponymous village lives isolated and in a constant fear of creatures in the surrounding forest. Similarly, during the 1992-3 War, a Georgian guerrilla group called Forest Brothers stayed in Abkhazia and continued a low-intensity war until 2004, spreading fear among locals (Kukhianidze et al. 2004). The village, called Covington, is a pre-modern society avoiding the Other, referred to as "Those We Don't Speak Of". This reminds us of Abkhazia's isolated existence (in both cases traditions and honour play an important role) and the simultaneous lack of knowledge about and the fear of the Other, perceived as threatening and barely human. Similar to Abkhazians and Georgians after the 1992-3 War, a long time ago (that only the Elders can remember), the Elders and the creatures agreed

²⁰³ Already at the beginning of 20th century, G. K. Chesterton (1905, 13) observed that: "A man's opinion on tramcars matters; his opinion on Botticelli matters; his opinion on all things does not matter. He may turn over and explore a million objects, but he must not find that strange object, the universe [...] Everything matters — except everything."

that they will not enter their respective territories. The creatures are human-like but not entirely human and the villagers have erected a fence and watch towers to keep constant watch. After a child in the village dies of disease, the main character Lucius Hunt (played by Joaquin Phoenix) wants to visit the neighbouring town in order to bring back medical supplies but is shunned by other villagers and denied by the village political elite - the Elders. This reminds us of the Abkhaz who cross the border to receive medical treatment in Georgia but are either met with disapproval or discouraged to speak about their experience by the society which shuns all contact with the other as suspicious and threatening. One day, a young mentally ill villager Noah appears with red berries (which do not grow in the village), suggesting he has been outside and was not harmed by the creatures. We could read this as the metaphor for the Gal/i Georgians – the heavily stigmatised, extimate, liminal people not of this world and not of the other, who retain contact with the outside, bringing in foreign goods. It could, alternatively, be equated with the civil society actors engaged in Second Track diplomacy, viewed suspiciously by both sides. The Elders are analogous to Abkhazian political elites, who are unhappy about such medical trips across the border as they expose the shortcomings of Abkhazia's healthcare specifically and its insufficient state-building generally. In both cases – Covington and Abkhazia – the ontological security of the community depends on strict regulation of contact with the outside world while the epistemological security is built on bad faith – stories about the threatening Other to its citizens. In the case of Abkhazia, we could say that it is the case of double bad faith – discouraging its citizens from getting to know the Other, and mimicry directed towards the other to present itself as a normal state, worthy of recognition. In both cases, outside engagement is threatening to the ontological security of the community. Ontological security rests on a mixture of false information and lack of information – on precarious epistemological security without reflexivity. We find out that the creatures do not exist and are merely suits worn by the Elders to keep the other villagers from going into the woods. This is precisely the case of the Georgians as depicted by Abkhazian political elites and the media. They are represented as hideous creatures, but in fact they are humans – the same humans as the Abkhazians (in the Village they are actually the very same humans – the disguised villagers),

who only look like creatures because the Elders/political elites depict them in this way. In the film, each Elder has a locked box containing remnants of their past that precedes the establishment of the village. In Abkhazia members of political elites for the most part remember the 1992-3 War, with many taking active part. Their memories ante bellum – of largely peaceful coexistence between Georgians, Abkhaz and other ethnicities – are suppressed, they are the locked boxes of the Elders. The end of the film reveals that Covington was established by one of the Elders, as a support community to help people who have lost their close ones to violence. The Village was created as a protective shell to isolate the suffering individuals whose ontological security has been compromised. Was Abkhazia not, similarly, established as a homeland for an injured and threatened Abkhazians to protect their identity from the hostile environment – of not only being threatened by Georgians, but becoming marginalized as a minority in their own Republic? The Village is intentionally preserved as a rural and rustic place of the 19th century to the extent that a no-fly zone is created over the territory. Abkhazia is no historical theme park, but a combination of war that damaged infrastructure (effectively de-urbanised Gal/i), de-industrialisation during failed transition, and international isolation, make the de facto state feel antiquated. While Covington looks back to the idealised 19th century, Abkhazia dwells in Soviet nostalgia. However spontaneous war damage is, there is also intentionality behind preserving empty buildings destroyed by the war, including the building of the Parliament in Sukhum/i. They are, at the same time, like the boxes of memories from past times before the village, and the ubiquitous warnings on the fence not to go into the forest. The gutted buildings are at the same time mementos of a golden past and a warning of the crimes capable by the Other.

Much remains unwritten and unexpressed in this thesis, mostly due to the limitations of scope. Silences are often as telling as what is explicitly stated and they should be allowed to tell a story too. In a way, Abkhazia's story is one of silence. Rarely listened to, even more rarely heard. Perhaps never completely understood. The Abkhaz seem mistrustful of the international community that has failed to listen to their voice and – in another instance of self-fulfilling prophecy – have been losing interest in voicing what they want. Their sense of honour

prevents them from begging for recognition and the wants themselves have become suppressed. They turned into sour grapes not unlike the ones expressed by Ivy Walker, the blind daughter of the chief Elder, to Lucius in *The Village*: “When I was younger, you used to hold my arm when I walked. Then suddenly you stopped. One day, I even tripped in your presence and nearly fell. I was faking, of course, but still you did not hold me. Sometimes we don't do things we want to do so that others will not know we want to do them.”

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Annex I: Information Sheet

Basic information about the research project

This Information Sheet is designed to provide basic information about the topic, objectives and methods of the research, information about the researcher, supervision and affiliated institution. It aims to invite potential participants to take part in the research and informs them about the

Research project title: *The role of elite interpretations of non-recognition in interactions between de facto states and recognised actors in the international community: the case of Abkhazia*

This interview is part of Urban Jakša's research for a PhD degree in Politics at the University of York, United Kingdom.

The research is supervised by Dr. Nina Caspersen, nina.caspersen@york.ac.uk.

The research plan has been the subject of ethical review and has been approved by the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS). *Chair of ELMPS: Debbie Haverstock, ReCSS, University of York, 6 Innovation Close, Heslington YO10 5ZF, elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk*

Topic and aims of research

The research looks at how Abkhazia's political elites and foreign policy decision-makers in Russia, the EU and the US, which engage with Abkhazia, interpret non-recognition and how this interpretation influences the formulation and implementation of their respective foreign policy objectives and strategies.

The aim of this research is to understand how different interpretations on non-recognition affect the interaction between Abkhazia and the international community.

The research involves elite interviews with decision-makers, government officials and other individuals, who are well placed to provide an insight into the foreign policy process of Abkhazia. The answers of interviewees will help the researcher to understand how non-recognition is perceived and interpreted in the context of foreign policy and how it affects the formation of foreign policy objectives and strategies.

Additional interviews (time and funding permitting) will be made with decision-makers in the European institutions, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US State Department to understand both sides of the interaction.

The data collected during the interview may be used in future research but will not be used for any commercial or any other non-academic purposes.

Interview format

The researcher and the participant agree on the date, place and length of the interview, considering participant's preferences.

Participation at the interview is voluntary and confidential. The right to confidentiality is maintained by the fact that the data will be used for research purposes only, will be safely stored and will not be given to anyone except the researcher and his supervisor.

The interviewee may withdraw from the interview for any reason and at any time. Should this happen, the data already collected, will be destroyed and will not be used in future research.

If the participant has any questions or doubts before the start of the interview, he/she can ask the researcher and is entitled to receive an explanation and/or clarification before proceeding with the interview.

The researcher is not able to offer any payment or reimbursement of any kind to people who choose to participate in the research.

Other conditions of participation

Participants have the right to be informed about the results of the research. If they wish to receive published work resulting from this research, they can provide their contacts on the consent form and will be contacted by the researcher after the research is published.

The researcher kindly asks for the interviews to be voice recorded, which will allow transcription and more accurate preservation of the information conveyed during the interview. The choice whether the participant chooses to have their voice recorded or not, however, is up to the participant and is not a condition to take part in the research.

The data gathered during the interview (notes and any audio material) will be safely and securely stored. Electronic data will be stored on password-protected computer, with paper data and electronic data on external drives stored in locked container. If the participants request to remain anonymous, data anonymisation will be provided and the choice of pseudonym will be agreed with the interviewee. The pseudonym will be protected by encrypted keys.

Should participants have any questions after the interview has taken place, or would like to contact the researcher, they can find his contact details at the bottom of this page. If they have doubts regarding the ethical conduct of the research, they can contact the researcher's supervisor or the Chair of ELMPS, whose contacts are provided above.

If participants have understood and agree to the conditions of the research, they are invited to sign the Consent Form.

Annex II: Consent Form

The role of elite interpretations of non-recognition in interactions between de facto states and recognised actors in the international community: the case of Abkhazia

Researcher: Urban Jaksa, PhD student (Politics), University of York

Consent form for interviewees

This form is for you to state whether you agree to take part in the research. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the study? Yes No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study? Yes No

Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher? Yes No

Do you understand that the participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the interview for any reason and at any time? Yes No

Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future research? Yes No

Do you agree to take part in the study? Yes No

If yes, do you agree to your interviews being recorded? Yes No

(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this).

Your name (in BLOCK letters):

Your contact e-mail and phone number (not obligatory):

Your signature: _____

Interviewee's name:

Date: _____