'Authoritarian Diffusion, or the Geopolitics of Self-Interest? Evidence from Russia's Patron–Client Relations with Eurasia's De Facto States'

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Since the turn of the millennium autocratic regimes have become both more numerous and more entrenched (Diamond 2008, Way 2016). One school of research has explained this phenomenon, inter alia, with reference to aggressive attempts made by existing autocracies to spread their political system to neighbouring states. This behaviour is seen as mirroring the active promotion of democracy in which many Western countries have continued to engage by supporting civil society and liberal NGOs throughout the world. Such dogged export of the Western political model to other countries is sometimes referred to as 'white knight' crusading, whereas the opposite phenomenon, of autocratic states attempting to undermine democracy by meddling in neighbouring states and spreading authoritarianism, is labelled 'black knight' crusading. This 'battle of knights' pits two politico-ideological systems against each other, with high stakes. China and Russia, as the two largest and most influential and autocratic regimes in the world today, have been singled out as particularly active 'black knights' (Chou 2017).

In 2015, *The European Journal of Political Research* published a forum section devoted to autocracy promotion by authoritarian regimes. Many of the contributors produced substantial evidence that Russia and other autocratic states are determined to export their nondemocratic political systems, in particular, they maintained that autocratic states actively try to influence

outcomes of national elections in other countries. Lucan Way, however, drawing on much of the same material, presented an alternative interpretation. He saw Russia's treatment of its neighbours in the 'near abroad' as basically driven by state interest, not by a desire to reproduce its political model elsewhere. In Way's view, the Kremlin's main concern has been to ensure that as many states as possible adopt a positive attitude towards Russia: the degree of democracy versus autocracy in these states has been of secondary importance (Way 2015a).

In this article I revisit this debate on the basis of another set of empirical materials, examining Russia's attitude towards elections in the three unrecognized 'de facto' states of the post-Soviet space which have Russia as their sole patron and protector: Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹ The secessionist regimes in these statelets broke away from Moldova and Georgia respectively after civil wars in the early 1990s that claimed thousands of casualties. They are recognized by a mere handful of UN member states (in the case of Transnistria, by no states whatsoever). Deprived of the protection which even the weakest and most dysfunctional internationally recognized states enjoy, they are totally dependent upon Russia for their security and economic sustenance (reference suppressed 2006; Caspersen 2012, pp. 54–59). Between 50% (Transnistria) and 90% (South Ossetia) of the state budget is underwritten by Moscow. Furthermore, Russia has military bases on their territories, and it is only the Russian military presence that prevents the parent state – the state from which they have unilaterally seceded – from recapturing them (as Georgia unsuccessfully tried in South

¹ For an introduction to the phenomenon of 'de facto' states see Pegg (1998) and Caspersen (2012), Caspersen and Stansfield (2011), and (reference suppressed 2006). For studies focusing more narrowly on post-Soviet de facto states, see Broers (2015), and Smolnik (2016).

Ossetia in 2008). Russia's potential for dictating election outcomes, if it should so desire, seems indubitable.

These patron–client relations present almost laboratory conditions for testing the ‘autocracy promotion’ versus the ‘state interest’ theses since they allow us to eliminate the need to secure geopolitical friends from the equation. With the need to protect state interests ensured, to what degree will the Kremlin dictate politics in a situation where it is fully able to do so? Even if these fragile statelets rely on Russia for their very survival, they have not adopted its model of chronic one-man rule. Only in one case has the ‘heir apparent’ won an election, and even he was unceremoniously chased from office by ‘the parliament of the street’ before serving his first term.²

Below, I first present the main arguments of the two sides in the black knight debate – as conducted in *The European Journal of Political Research* and elsewhere – before reviewing elections in post-Soviet de facto states, focusing on Russia's role in them. The evidence is ambiguous, and the degree of Russian election meddling has varied. Even so, the clear pattern seems to emerge that the Kremlin's desire to dictate outcomes has weakened over time, and the latitude granted to the leaders of these de facto states for organizing their own polity has grown. This has opened up space for pluralistic politics in some but not all of Russia's de facto client states. The pressure which Russia exerted on these statelets in the early years after de facto independence may arguably be interpreted as the knee-jerk Big Brother behaviour of an authoritarian regime, gradually abandoned as the Kremlin has come to regard such treatment of its clients as unnecessary and even potentially harmful.

² This was the ‘May Revolution’ against President Alexander Ankvab in Abkhazia in 2014.

While the degree of pluralism in Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia has differed, one factor remains a you you are you are you are a you are a you are you are a you you are a you are the you are you are constant: all political players in these de facto states have consistently favoured retaining strong relations with Russia, since any weakening of patron support would put the survival of the statelet in question. Moscow's growing tolerance of political models in the de facto states that deviate from Putin's authoritarian system seems premised on the conviction that these small, dependent allies have nowhere else to turn, and will never threaten to escape from Russian tutelage. Under conditions when the Kremlin can rest assured that its geopolitical interests remain secure, it feels less impelled to meddle in the domestic politics of a client state. These findings lend support to the interpretation of the foreign policy of Russian in particular – and, by extension, autocratic states in general – as driven basically by state interest, not by any desire to reproduce themselves in small clones among the neighbours.

Autocracy Promotion versus State Interest: A Survey of the Debate

Many of the participants in the scholarly debate on 'black knights' adhere to the view that authoritarian states in their foreign policy doggedly try to export their political system to other countries. Analysing Russia's policy towards post-Soviet Central Asia, for instance, Nicole Jackson (2010) argues that a major objective has been to influence the regimes in these states to maintain or further entrench authoritarian rule. While this pressure has not been as comprehensive or systematic as Western efforts to democratize other countries, Russia has, in her view, supported Central Asia's regimes, for example, 'by actively countering democratization efforts, by providing legitimacy and political support, and by diversifying

relations' (Jackson 2010, p. 102). Her evidence in support of this conclusion, however, is not always equally strong. For instance, that Putin has indeed, as Jackson notes, congratulated the incumbent winner of these often-rigged elections may have helped to legitimize these regimes. The political leaders in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, however, hardly need any prompting to retain their authoritarian leadership style. That being so obvious, most of the debate on Russia's role as a black knight has focused not on Central Asia, but on its policy towards countries in the European parts of the former Soviet Union. Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova have been analysed as battlefields in a tug of war, with the EU trying to promote Western-style democratization, and Russia trying to prevent it.

In *Promoting Authoritarianism* Rachel Vanderhill (2013) argues that Russia is trying to prevent the establishment of autocratic regimes in Ukraine and Belarus because democratic neighbours will escape from the Kremlin's sphere of influence and join the West. 'Belarus without Lukashenko would be more likely to be democratic, which is seen as a geopolitical threat to the Russian government. The Russian leadership believes that the "survival of autocracy at home increasingly depends upon the failure of democracy abroad"'³ (Vanderhill 2013, p. 75). Another possible motive behind Russia's attitude Vanderhill sees in the perceived need to forestall the social instability which a regime change in an autocratic state might unleash. In any case, whatever the reasons, Russia's behavior has, in her view, 'enabled the development of authoritarianism in each country' (Vanderhill 2013, p. 41).

Vanderhill's analysis is seconded by Jakob Tolstrup in *Russia vs. the EU: The Competition for Influence in Post-Soviet States* (2014). Tolstrup acknowledges that Lukashenko has been a highly troublesome ally for Russia, and relations between the two countries have been a

³ The quotation in the quotation is from V. Silitskii (2009)

roller-coaster ride. Whenever the Belarusian leadership has failed to toe the Kremlin line it has been punished by cuts in the privileged terms of trade which the country enjoys with its eastern neighbour, but Russia has always made sure not to push Lukashenko's regime completely out of kilter. The Kremlin has no desire to initiate regime change. Like Vanderhill, Tolstrup assumes that there may be several motives behind this behaviour, with the promotion of autocracy among the most important:

[T]here is no doubt that preserving authoritarian regimes in the neighborhood gained more and more significance for Russia's leaders. Most often, democratization meant not only rapprochement with the West and a stronger will to end corrupt actions, but it also questioned the legitimacy of non-democratic rule in general. And this, of course, was poison to the increasing authoritarianism that characterized Putin's Russia (Tolstrup 2014, p. 244).

In his contribution to the *EJPR* forum section, Tolstrup (2015a, p. 674) identified five mechanisms by which such regime bolstering in authoritarian neighbour states may be conducted: helping incumbents to signal invincibility, deterring elite defection, weakening the opposition, dampening popular protest, and countervailing pressures from foreign democracy promoters. However, black-knight support, Tolstrup believes, will not necessarily be offered under all circumstances. It is particularly likely if good relations with the country's leadership are deemed crucial for strategic purposes, such as counterbalancing other powers, gaining access to strategic locations, or maintaining military bases. Analysing Russia's role in elections Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova between 2004 and 2009, he concludes that Russia has frequently engaged in black-knight election bolstering. However, he notes that also

democracies may behave as black knights, as when the United States propped up dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s (Tolstrup 2015a, p. 676).⁴

Christian von Soest (2015) finds that mutual support among authoritarian regimes does indeed take place quite frequently, with major autocratic states like China, Russia and Saudi Arabia all engaging in it. They will always prefer autocratic neighbours over democracies. The main motivation for such behaviour, in his view, is not ideological but self-serving: it helps to safeguard their geostrategic interests and maximize the chances of authoritarian regime survival by weakening democratic forces at home. Powerful autocratic states will normally not support ‘autocracy in general’ but will prop up only ‘friendly’ authoritarian regimes. Von Soest also notes – as do also many other participants in the debate – that deliberate autocratic attempts to manipulate outcomes in elections in neighbouring states may well backfire by galvanizing opposition towards foreign-backed authoritarian incumbents.

Lucan Way (2015a), however, doubts that autocracy promotion is widespread in international politics. He acknowledges that certain authoritarian states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia do try to prop up individual nondemocratic states in their neighbourhoods, but in his view they are not promoting authoritarianism as such; instead, these states are trying to spread one particular sectarian ideology, their own, by pushing back rival, equally authoritarian ideologies. In the case of Russia under Vladimir Putin, Way finds that the regime is not particularly concerned about ideologies at all. There is little evidence that Russia’s behaviour in the ‘near abroad’ has made the post-Soviet space less democratic than it would otherwise have been. Most post-Soviet states are indeed authoritarian, but the sources of their autocracy

⁴ A more recent example of a democratic black-knight action was US support of the Bahrain monarchy during the Arab Spring in 2011. See Ambrosio (2014).

are domestic rather than imposed from outside. Whenever Russia has interfered in domestic affairs in neighbouring states, it has done so to make sure of being surrounded by friends: whether or not these states are autocracies has not been the main issue. Moreover, Russia has several times, to its chagrin, experienced that ham-fisted attempts to dictate politics in post-Soviet states have backfired: for instance, contested elections in Moldova and Ukraine have brought into power anti-Russian forces. Way draws the conclusion that

scholars ought to more carefully distinguish between an autocratic government's efforts to promote governments that back their geopolitical objectives, on the one hand, and the promotion of authoritarianism *as such*, on the other. There is clear evidence for the former in Russia, but less obvious support for the latter (Way 2015a, 702, italics in original).

A similar position is taken by David R. Cameron and Mitchell A. Orenstein (2012, 23), who note that '[i]t is not obvious that Russia needed to exert any leverage to thwart democratic ambitions in most [post-Soviet] states; the national leaders did that themselves – and, indeed, in most instances did so before the Russian leaders did.' Cameron and Orenstein make the important methodological point that '[o]ne cannot, of course, assume that the absence of change over time in a country reflects the absence of Russian influence just as one cannot assume that the diminution of rights and liberties in a country reflects the presence of Russian influence.' They conclude that 'the most prudent assumption is that the patterns of both stability and change over time are the result of decisions taken by the governing elites of the countries in response to domestically-generated pressures rather than Russian influence' (Cameron and Orenstein 2012, pp. 19–20).

This view is echoed by Ekaterina Furman (2015) in her analysis of Russian public diplomacy towards the post-Soviet states. In her view, it can be argued that Russia has never actually pursued autocracy-boosting in its policy towards the post-Soviet space. Instead, the country has ‘tried to uphold its dominance and resisted any attempts to challenge the status quo rather than consciously tried to spread political systems similar to the Russian one’ (Furman 2015, p. 171). The main criterion for support was willingness to follow Russia’s demands: and whenever that willingness was lacking in a country, the Kremlin was quite happy to see the regime replaced by another.

A common underlying assumption of many scholars of the regime-promotion school is that autocratic states are behaving defensively and reactively, and are even angst-ridden. As Thomas Ambrosio (2009, xii, 23), for instance, argues, ‘[f]awmawmor authoritarian regimes to feel secure, they can not abide vibrant democracies within close proximity... [They] are deeply concerned with the political systems of their neighbours: a successful democratic transition within close proximity represents an ever-present symbolic threat of the possibility of regime change.’ By contrast, the ‘geopolitical interpretation’ often sees the foreign policy of autocratic states as proactive and opportunistic. Natalia Shapovalova and Kateryna Zarembo (2010) even detect what they call ‘Russia’s Machiavellian support for democracy’. Not only democratic but also undemocratic leaders fail to get Kremlin approval if their policies are not in line with Russian interests and demands. These two authors note several instances when the Putin regime has supported the opposition against authoritarian incumbents in post-Soviet states – as against Lukashenko in Belarus 2010, against Bakiev in Kyrgyzstan 2010, and against Saakashvili in Georgia on several occasions. ‘Russian policies in the neighbourhood adopt democracy promotion rhetoric when it is deemed effective for geopolitical reasons’ (Shapovalova and Zarembo 2010, p. 1).

My examination of Russia's interference in presidential elections in de facto states in the former Soviet space lends support to the geopolitical interpretation. Russia is definitely the most influential outside power able to impact on the political trajectories of these statelets. Initially, the Kremlin used what it regarded as its *droit de regard* to indicate a particular politician as their preferred candidate for the presidency. Whenever the de facto states' populations blatantly ignored these signals at the polls and voted for another candidate, the initial reaction of the Russian leaders was to take this as an intolerable snub. Increasingly, however, they seem to be asking themselves why they should have to insist on one particular candidate among many. Since all political players in these statelets are strongly pro-Russian, the paramount objective of having in place governments that would back the Kremlin's geopolitical objectives would be secured in any case. Therefore, the top priority for Russia with regard to its client de facto states increasingly seems to be to promote political stability and prevent social unrest. If the economic situation in these states should deteriorate too sharply, Russia would have to bear the burden of preventing total collapse. Since corruption is a drain on the economy in all states, the Kremlin has apparently come to believe that it has a vested interest in a reasonably well-functioning economy and social order in its client states.

If this analysis is correct, it may help to explain a puzzle: these statelets have often enjoyed a higher degree of political pluralism and vibrant civil society than what is found in Russia itself. Elections have repeatedly led to the defeat of the incumbent, with power being transferred to an opposition candidate. Transnistria has had three presidents since its (de facto) independence; Abkhazia and South Ossetia have had four. Increasingly, the Kremlin has accepted the defeat of its chosen candidates, and has recently stopped indicating any favourites at all (see Table 1).

Below, I offer portraits, warts and all, of political developments in the three post-Soviet de facto statelets that have Russia as their patron. The analysis is limited to presidential elections – ignoring local and parliamentary elections – since in these unrecognized states, as in most post-Soviet states, the president is the fulcrum around which political life revolves. I pay particular attention to how Moscow’s attitudes have gradually evolved, opening up space for autonomous political agency.

Table 1 in around here

Second Phase: Glitches in Moscow’s Remote Control

In the first years after secession, elections in the Russia-sponsored post-Soviet de facto states seem to have been influenced by a ‘besieged fortress’ syndrome. In the aftermath of civil war and under total international isolation, it was essential to rally around the leader: domestic political struggles were an unthinkable luxury. Therefore, there was widespread reluctance to challenge incumbent leaders in an open political fight.

During perestroika, many Soviet republics had elected as heads of state academics respected for their intellectual achievements and moral integrity, without necessarily being strong leaders. This was the case in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Georgia, as well as in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The South Ossetians elected as head of state a renowned ethnographer and director of the state pedagogical institute, Eduard Chibirov, and the Abkhazians a doctor of cultural history, an expert on the ancient Hittite culture, Vladislav Ardzinba. Chibirov

remained head of state for eight years, but lost the presidency in 2001 to a very different kind of politician – a former wrestling champion and physical education teacher, Eduard Kokoity. Several candidates had contested the 2001 elections, and Kokoity secured victory only after the second round, gaining as little as 53% of the vote. He proved very adept in the wheeling and dealing necessary to stay in power, and was re-elected in 2006 by a considerably stronger majority. South Ossetian law sets a maximum of two presidential terms, but Kokoity for a long time tried to get around that prohibition and to run for a third time by having the constitution amended. Only when the Kremlin clearly signalled that Kokoity no longer enjoyed Russia's support did he relent (Dergachev 2016; Skakov 2017, p. 92). His departure opened the field for a wide array of new candidates in the 2011 elections.

In Abkhazia, matters took a different turn. During the war of independence, Vladislav Ardzinba had re-created himself from an academic into a freedom fighter, commander-in-chief of the Abkhazian forces. When victory had been won, Ardzinba enjoyed a position as a national hero second to none, and was elected president twice: first by the parliament in 1994, then in 1999 by general elections, running unopposed. However, during his second term in office, his popularity frayed, due to widespread corruption and nepotism under his rule. The mounting dissatisfaction crystallized into an increasingly vocal opposition, but before matters came to a head, Ardzinba fell seriously ill and had to step down in 2004. The Abkhazian presidential elections that year fielded several candidates.

In the third post-Soviet de facto state under scrutiny here, Transnistria, the first head of state had a very different background. Igor Smirnov, a factory director in one of Transnistria's major plants, had spearheaded the United Council of Work Collectives – the OSTK – during the struggle for independence. He was elected and re-elected president three times (1996,

2001 and 2006) – quite remarkably, as he faced formidable adversaries. The war of secession in summer 1992 had been won solely thanks to the intervention of the Soviet 14th Army, then commanded by General Alexander Lebed. Soon afterwards, however, the Russian general and the Transnistrian president fell out. The immensely popular Lebed, ‘the Savior of Transnistria,’ openly accused the Smirnov clan of pervasive corruption and abuse of power, but Smirnov weathered the storm. In 1994, Lebed was recalled to Moscow, leaving Smirnov as match winner (reference suppressed 1998).

With each presidential election, Smirnov won by increasingly higher margins, from 64% in 1991 to 82% in 2006, but these elections were by no means free or fair. The opposition was allowed to field candidates – but they were not allowed to win. The Communist Party in particular regularly entered candidates – who were not only denied airtime in the state media, but also publicly harassed and even physically attacked. In addition to Smirnov’s powerful network, with tentacles into every nook and cranny of Transnistrian society, only one strong political force existed in the de facto state. This was the business conglomerate Sheriff, which had been established in the early 1990s and gradually acquired a dominant position in Transnistria’s economy. Sheriff was owned by two former policemen who personally did not display any political ambitions; as long as they stuck to their business, they seemed to have established a live-and-let-live symbiosis with Smirnov. In 2000, however, Sheriff was behind the establishment of the movement Renewal (*Obnovlenie*) – later registered as a political party – which not only fielded its own candidates in the 2005 parliamentary elections, but even garnered a majority of the seats. This was a clear challenge to Smirnov, and also an indication that Transnistria politics was becoming if not open and pluralistic, and then at least developing into a duopoly. Smirnov’s iron grip was slipping, but the Renewal leadership decided that the time was not ripe to challenge him directly. In 2006, Renewal leader and

parliamentary speaker Evgenii Shevchuk explained that he would not run against Smirnov, so as not to ‘rock the boat’ in a difficult political situation: ‘The political struggle that could arise as a result of my nomination as presidential candidate could lead to an institutional crisis.’

(*Tiraspol Times*, 9 December 2006, cited in reference suppressed 2012, p. 202) This was an echo of the siege mentality dominant in the de facto states in the early 1990s. Five years later, however, Renewal had changed its mind: in 2011, Transnistria experienced a political earthquake and its first transfer of power.

The Third Phase: Weakening Signals From Moscow

When, for various reasons, the local strongmen in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria left politics, this radically altered the political game. Due to President Ardzinba’s illness, change came first in Abkhazia, in 2004; and then in South Ossetia and Transnistria seven years later, in 2011. On all three occasions, presidential elections ended with the unexpected victory of an opposition candidate. One of these candidates, Alla Jioeva in South Ossetia, was clearly an outsider, whereas the winners in Abkhazia and Transnistria were seasoned politicians. What all three had in common was that none of them enjoyed Moscow’s backing – nevertheless, they were able to sway the electorate. With hindsight we realize that these elections marked a turning point in patron–client relationships between Russia and the post-Soviet de facto states. At the time, however, Russia’s reactions varied considerably in the three cases, ranging from ham-fisted interference, to compromise, and to equanimity and acquiescence.

Five candidates contested the Abkhazian elections in 2004. Ardzinba’s prime minister, Raul Khajimba, had been handpicked by the ailing president as his successor, and received open

support from Russia (Smolnik 2016, pp. 176–179). A large delegation of Russian politicians and entertainers was dispatched to Sukhumi to back him up. At a rally in Sukhumi, populist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskii, flamboyant as always, declared that if Khajimba did not win, Russia would stop paying pensions to Abkhazian pensioners, and the border between the two countries would be closed. Such pressure, however, had the opposite of the intended effect. The challenger candidate, Sergei Bagapsh, won with 50.8% of the vote in the first round, which should have made a second round unnecessary. Khajimba, however, refused to concede defeat, claiming massive election fraud. The Abkhazian Supreme Court prevaricated, first accepting, then rejecting, and finally reconfirming the verdict of the Central Election Committee, but Khajimba (with Russian backing) still did not yield. A month-long deadlock ensued until a crowd of 5,000 Bagapsh supporters occupied the building of the presidential administration (Triers *et al.* 2010, pp. 10–11). At this point, rumours of impending civil war filled the air (Ó Beacháin 2012, p. 169; Platonova 2013, p.117). Finally, it was agreed to hold repeat elections in January 2005 in which Bagapsh would run with Khajimba as vice-presidential candidate. This was arranged, and the duo duly won. However, tensions in the tandem erupted almost immediately, and after less than a year Khajimba withdrew from the vice presidency. He joined the opposition and prepared for a second attempt at the presidency (Smolnik 2016: 180–181).

For Russia, the whole incident was an unmitigated fiasco. Kremlin political technologists had employed the same methods as they were used to practising at home, in the Russian regions, but Abkhazia displayed remarkable obstinacy, refusing to accept unconditionally Moscow's monarchical will.

Sergei Bagapsh served out his first term as president and received a renewed mandate from the population in the 2009 elections, now with a larger margin (62%). His nemesis, Raul Khajimba, finished second, but received only 15% of the vote (Ó Beacháin 2012, p. 169). However, like his predecessor Ardzinba, also Bagapsh fell ill, and died in May 2011 after an operation in Moscow. This necessitated snap elections, which were held in August. The winner was Alexander Ankvab, who had served as vice-president under Bagapsh and therefore represented continuity; previously, he had held positions as Prime Minister and Minister of Internal Affairs. Khajimba tried his luck for the third time, but finished only in third place (Ó Beacháin 2012, p. 170). However, he was apparently driven by an overwhelming desire to occupy the presidential chair, and benefited from Ankvab's rapidly declining popularity. The opposition accused the president, not entirely without reason, of growing authoritarianism, and also used some dubious ethno-nationalist arguments against him: Ankvab had allowed ethnically Georgian residents of Abkhazia to receive Abkhazian passports without giving up their Georgian citizenship, and that was against the interests of ethnic Abkhazians, the opposition declared. Week after week, Khajimba and his friends organized mass rallies in the Abkhazian capital, surrounding government buildings and demanding the president's ouster. For a second time in three years, rumors of impending civil war circulated in the unrecognized republic, but no bloodshed ensued. In June 2014, after several months of failed negotiations with the opposition, Ankvab caved in. He stepped down and fled to Moscow. In the campaign leading up to the new elections held in August, Khajimba emphatically denied that he was Moscow's favorite, claiming that 'after 2004 Moscow drew the appropriate conclusion to keep equal distance to all public figures in Abkhazia and will work with the winners of elections' ('Raul Khajimba' 2014).

Khajimba received slightly more than 50% of the vote, and could finally enter the presidential palace, on his fourth attempt. This time, thousands of ethnic Georgians who had been granted citizenship under Ankvab were once again disenfranchised. The circumstances of Khajimba's ascent to power have, with good reason, been described as a coup d'état (Ó Beacháin 2017). Moreover, the genie of ochlocracy had been let out of the bottle, and Khajimba's tactics of filling the streets of the capital with rowdy supporters were copied by his adversaries. Since 2016, opposition groups have organized mass rallies demanding his resignation, as yet with no success.

In South Ossetia, the departure of Eduard Kokoity from the presidency opened the field to a wide array of candidates in the November 2011 elections: no less than 17 hopefuls registered, 11 of whom finished the race. The two frontrunners, Anatolii Bibilov and Alla Jioeva, passed the finishing line almost neck and neck: there were only 14 more votes for Bibilov (25.44%) than for Jioeva (25.37%). Bibilov was Minister of Civil Defence and Emergency Situations, held the rank of Lieutenant General, and enjoyed the explicit backing of Moscow (Skakov 2012, p. 74). Jioeva was a former Minister of Education but had fallen out with Kokoity and been sentenced to two years of house arrest on what may have been trumped-up charges of corruption. She was not, however, barred from entering the presidential race, and became a rallying figure for those Ossetians who wanted radical change.

The preliminary results from the second round of the elections gave Jioeva 56.7% of the vote against 40% for her opponent. Bibilov, however, filed a complaint, claiming that Jioeva's campaign had tried to intimidate voters as well as members of the Central Election Committee. It is not clear how an outsider candidate should be able to do so, but Central Election Committee was nevertheless pressured to annul the results. As explains Alexander

Skakov (2012: 74), ‘Moscow wanted a president obedient to its commands’, and the Kremlin was not sure that Jioeva would be such a person. It was decided that new elections would be held in which neither Jioeva nor Bibilov would be allowed to participate, but Jioeva’s supporters were not ready to accept that. They reacted by pouring into the streets, while backroom negotiations resulted in a compromise from which Jioeva later withdrew: she had won the elections and did not feel that she should have to run a second time, so she proceeded to make preparations for her inauguration. To forestall this, she was forcibly taken into custody, lost consciousness during the arrest, and was hospitalized. In the repeat elections in March 2012 Leonid Tibilov, a former head of the local KGB, won with 54% of the vote in the second round (‘Alla Jioeva’ n.d.).

Only one month after these tumultuous events in South Ossetia, elections in another de facto state, this time Transnistria, once again yielded an outcome not to the Kremlin’s liking. This resulted from strong new signals from the Kremlin that President Smirnov would have to go (NTV 2011; Litskai 2016). Having put up with his misrule and embezzlement of Russian aid for almost two decades, Moscow had now had enough. Russian state-controlled media launched a vigorous campaign against Smirnov and his family, detailing how his son had been lining his pockets with Russian money (BBC 2011). Smirnov had withstood even stronger pressures from Moscow under Yeltsin and tried to ignore these allegations, but Moscow’s new attitude emboldened Renewal to challenge him. Since 2006, however, Evgenii Shevchuk had fallen out with his party: it was now his successor as Speaker of the Parliament, Anatolii Kaminskii, who ran as the Renewal candidate. Shevchuk decided to try his luck as an independent instead. He garnered 38% and Kaminskii 26% of the vote, with no slot for the incumbent president in the run-off. Smirnov cried foul, alleging that voters’ lists had been

tampered with – not a very convincing accusation, as they had been compiled by officials in his own administration.

Even more surprising than the results of the first round was the outcome of the second one.

Moscow openly supported Kaminskii, but that did not help him much. The election campaign was for all intents and purposes free and fair, and also to some extent Americanized in the sense that TV debates proved decisive. The voters preferred the youngish and fresh-looking Shevchuk to the perhaps competent but stolid and uninspiring Parliamentary Speaker.

Shevchuk won a landslide victory: 77% against Kaminskii's 19% (Racheva 2016) .

The 2011 Transnistrian presidential elections, then, were remarkable in at least three respects.

- They were the first presidential elections in which the outcome could not be predicted, and indeed came a surprise to most observers.
- They followed close on the heels on the abortive election of Alla Jioeva as president of South Ossetia. Fully aware of the strong-arm tactics that had been deployed against her, the Transnistrian electorate nevertheless proceeded to vote for an outsider candidate in their own elections.
- The defeat of the Kremlin-supported candidate in Transnistria did not follow the South Ossetian script. Moscow acquiesced and accepted the outcome without further ado.

After 2011, the Kremlin has basically stopped endorsing specific candidates in de facto state elections, apparently realizing that such pressure is counterproductive and likely to alienate the local populations. Since these client states in any case are totally dependent upon Russian support, economically and militarily, the Kremlin can safely assume that every new de facto

state leader, whoever it may be, will be a loyal ally. In the one instance when the Russians nevertheless backed a specific presidential candidate in a de facto state – in South Ossetia in April 2017 – they kept a stiff upper lip when their preferred candidate lost.

The Third Phase: Weakening Signals From Moscow

The most recent presidential elections in Transnistria, in 2016, were even more fiercely contested than those in 2011. Once again, the main contenders were the candidate representing Sheriff/Renewal – this time Parliamentary Speaker Vadim Krasnoselskii – on the one hand, and Evgenii Shevchuk on the other. This time Shevchuk was the incumbent, and fought tooth and nail to keep his post even though his popular support had crumbled dramatically over the past five years. He made the national state-controlled media part of his private election campaign apparatus, boldly vilifying his main opponent. When opinion polls indicated that he was trailing far behind Krasnoselskii, he produced his own, clearly faked, surveys to prove that he was leading (reference suppressed 2017, p. 518). Ominously, he indicated that the Central Election Committee was in cahoots with Krasnoselskii, and that, if Krasnoselskii were proclaimed the winner, he might have to declare an emergency and invalidate the elections (*Pervyi pridnestrovskii* 2016; Kostromin 2016). Krasnoselskii, for his part, fought a more moderate but still rather dirty campaign, drawing on the considerable resources of Sheriff. The political climate in Transnistria remained extremely tense right up to election day (reference suppressed 2017).

In the end, the denouement of this drama was almost an anti-climax: Krasnoselskii won with 62% of the vote in the first round, with Shevchuk receiving only 27% in a seven-way race, a result which made a second round unnecessary. There were no allegations of election fraud, and Shevchuk accepted the result without protest. For the second time in two consecutive elections, Transnistria had experienced a peaceful, albeit noisy, transfer of power.

Russia's role in these elections was restrained but crucial. Each of the main contenders had been bending over backwards to prove how pro-Russian he was, also trying by various means to present himself as Moscow's favorite (reference suppressed 2017, pp. 520-25). However, Russian officialdom kept aloof and pointedly did not throw its weight behind either candidate. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maryia Zakharova declared, 'we do not take the side of any of the candidates.' However, the explanation she gave sounded decidedly far-fetched: 'We do not get involved in the campaigns for the election of heads of states or parliament in other countries. We regard that as unlawful.' ('Moskva ne podderzhivaet' 2016). Given Moscow's track record of such interference, this statement could be interpreted either as a sanctimonious lie or as signalling a new policy. From the material presented in this article, I am inclined to accept the latter interpretation. In either case, Moscow had clearly decided to adopt a different role in the elections this time. Only when the results had been announced and Krasnoselskii had been declared the winner did Russia get involved. Shevchuk was summoned to Moscow and persuaded to step down voluntarily, and was apparently given assurances that he would not be charged with corruption or abuse of power during his presidency. However, that pledge was not honoured, and Shevchuk later had to flee the country in order to escape prosecution (Racheva 2017).

Also in the elections held in South Ossetia half a year later, in April 2017, Russia once again played a less menacing role than previously. The incumbent, Leonid Tibilov, was challenged by Anatolii Bibilov, who, as we may recall, had been Moscow's favoured candidate in the first round of the 2011 elections, but had not been allowed to compete in the new elections that followed when the first elections were declared invalid. This time around, however, Bibilov no longer enjoyed the backing of the Putin regime, which had long since signalled that it preferred Tibilov to be re-elected (Dergachev 2016; Fuller 2017). There were few political differences between the two candidates, but an important one concerned attitudes towards Russia. Both frontrunners were strongly pro-Russian – it is impossible to be a presidential candidate in any of the *de facto* states otherwise – but, in the Kremlin's view, Bibilov's enthusiasm for immediate inclusion of South Ossetia into the Russian Federation went over the top. Moscow knew that any more annexations of new territories after Crimea would be met with severe condemnation not only in the West but probably also in many post-Soviet states. Fully aware of Moscow's caginess, Bibilov nevertheless continued to press ahead with his annexation plans – and was rewarded by the South Ossetians with victory in the elections. Even if the Kremlin would have preferred another outcome, they acquiesced, and no repetition of the unhappy aftermath of the 2011 elections ensued (Fuller 2017).

Democracy in Post-Soviet De Facto States

During the Cold War, the Soviet-controlled network of satellite states in Eastern Europe had to copy Moscow's socio-political system – lock, stock, and barrel (Carrère d'Encausse 1987). The Communist Party of the USSR reproduced itself in small clones as the state-bearing parties throughout the Eastern Bloc. Since the Soviet Union was not a democracy, no genuine democracy was allowed in the 'outer empire' either. Much of the explanation for this is

probably that Moscow had no trust in the loyalty of its satellites and felt a need to keep them under tight control. As we know, there were solid grounds for this distrust: several uprisings took place in Soviet-controlled East European states in the post-war period: East Berlin 1953, Poland and Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968. The fact that Moscow today allows its de facto state dependencies a higher degree of free choice of political system seems to be grounded in the opposite assumption: that these states will not under any circumstances try to defect. While elections in these states may leave much to be desired from the perspective of democracy, the tendency has been towards greater pluralism. Outcomes have been unpredictable, and challenger candidates have won remarkably often (Ó Beacháin 2015).

To be sure, certain circumstances around the establishment of the post-Soviet de facto states are deeply troubling. For instance, the ethnic cleansing of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia, albeit under conditions of civil war, cannot be justified. Still, we should be able to study the political system of these states in terms of the political rights and civil liberties of the population now living there, based on the performance of their existing political institutions, using the same yardstick as when assessing democratic procedures in other states. This is what Freedom House does with regard to, for instance, Israel, which scores 1.5 on a scale where 1 is highest and 7 the lowest for its open, Western-style democracy, without being penalized for the past history of Nakba (the expulsion of Arabs in 1948), or for the settlements on the West Bank today, illegal under international law.

As noted, in only one instance has the new head of state in a post-Soviet de facto state that has Russia as its patron been the anointed successor of the outgoing president – in sharp contrast to the situation in Russia. There have also been very few accusations of election fraud; there are exceptions, but in all three states the losing candidates have normally accepted the final

vote tally. That is not to say that these three unrecognized states are model democracies.: in South Ossetia, the 2011 elections got short-circuited: the officially declared winner was not only barred from taking office, but arrested and maltreated. And certain aspects of Abkhazian political culture are troubling: Opposition parties have a disconcerting tendency to lead their supporters into the streets in attempts to topple the president before his term is up; in 2014, they succeeded. Also, ethnic Abkhazians have largely managed to monopolize power within their group, with Armenians, Georgians and Russians marginalized in an informal political culture that effectively amounts to ‘ethnic democracy’ (reference suppressed 2013). But in the context of this study, it is important to note that these deviations from liberal democracy have domestic roots and did not stem from any emulation of Russian practices.

The relatively high degree of political pluralism in the de facto states of the post-Soviet space has rarely registered on the radars of Western political observers, for at least two reasons. Firstly, these states are so inconspicuous that their very existence is often overlooked. De facto states are fringe phenomena in international politics: in addition to the three examined here, there are only three to six others – depending on the definition – in the world today, among them the Armenian-dominated Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) in Azerbaijan, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), and Somaliland in war-torn Somalia. On many maps these wannabe states do not figure at all; under international law they are still part of the country from which they have seceded; and in drawing interstate borders, cartographers are normally guided more by formal criteria than by political realities.

A second reason for the failure to note the increasing pluralism in de facto states is that they are often given unreasonably low ratings in comparative democracy studies (see e.g. reference suppressed 2012). To its credit, the best-known monitoring agency of democracy around the

globe, Freedom House, has since 2002 included the de facto states in its annual reports, but their successful post-election transfers of power have not resulted in higher ratings. On its World Index, South Ossetia has unfailingly been given 6.5 points, while Transnistria every year between 2002 in 2016 received the same score of 6.0 (see Table 2). Commenting upon the Transnistrian elections in 2011, the compilers of the Freedom House report pronounced, without much discussion, that ‘Residents of Transnistria cannot choose their leaders democratically’ (Freedom House 2012). That assessment was made after the Transnistrians had recently ousted the incumbent president through the ballot box and had also rebuffed Russia’s preferred candidate for the office. In 2017 Transnistria’s Freedom House score dropped even further, to 6.5, although it had, in the previous year, for the second time removed its president in a multi-candidate election. Oddly, Abkhazia has been rated higher – between 4.5 and 5 – even if its political culture, as noted, has certain troubling elements, like ethnic favoritism and rowdy mobs.

Table 2 in around here

Political life in Moscow’s de facto client states in the post-Soviet space is remarkably vibrant. Regardless of how the Abkhazian political system ought to be described – as democracy, ethnic democracy, or okhlocracy – it is simply not autocracy. This is not to say that strong civil society organizations abound: as most places elsewhere, politics is generally an elite preoccupation, and the public gets involved only during election campaigns and on election days. Only in Abkhazia are there popular movements with significant memberships that engage actively in politics. Moreover, with the Sheriff company controlling both the legislature and the executive in Transnistria, we see signs that they in the future may not allow as open and contested elections as those of 2011 and 2016. As Lucan Way (2015b, p. 23) has

convincingly argued, two or even more successive Huntington-style turnovers may not necessarily be sufficient to usher in consolidated democracy unless also other prerequisites are present. Indeed, the current Transnistrian leadership now has the power to reintroduce autocracy, should it so decide. However, the important point here is that if this should come to pass, it will be the result of domestic Transnistrian politics and not imposed by Russian diktat.

On the other hand, there is no particular reason to believe that the Kremlin should try to stop such a democratic backlash, in Transnistria or elsewhere: it appears more likely to cooperate with the new leaders in the de facto states whoever they may be. The only circumstances which might prompt Russia to withdraw support and signal open dissatisfaction would be if corruption and mismanagement should reach such proportions that social stability could be imperilled, requiring Russia to step up its economic support substantially.

Russia's Priorities: Friendly, But Not Necessarily Autocratic Neighbours

In an article from 2015 Jakob Tolstrup has tried to extend his analysis of Russia's promotion of autocracy in its 'near abroad' to include also support for illiberal regimes in unrecognized post-Soviet states. Instead of the conventional term 'de facto states' he prefers to designate these unrecognized entities as 'pockets of autocracy' (Tolstrup 2015b): he sees authoritarianism not as a contingent quality of these statelets, but as a defining characteristic. One of Tolstrup's two cases is Transnistria, and even though he was writing in 2015, four years after the Transnistrians ousted their autocratic president Smirnov in a multi-candidate election, this is nowhere reflected in his article. In my view, however, we cannot understand

the dynamics of de facto state politics without explaining how such elections have been possible.

While the road toward (reasonably) free and fair elections in the de facto states has been bumpy, the trend has nevertheless been towards an orderly transfer of power. Various local factors may be involved, but much of the explanation is clearly that Russia has gradually adopted a more relaxed attitude towards its clients. Without such a change in the Kremlin's attitude, the movement toward more pluralistic politics in these de facto states would not have been possible. Paradoxically, the Putin regime accepts a higher degree of genuine political pluralism in these utterly dependent entities than it allows its own citizens in Russia. The contrast with the wholesale export of the Soviet political system to Eastern Europe after the Second World War could hardly be greater.

The pluralism which Russia is willing to grant its client-states should not necessarily be interpreted as magnanimity or philanthropy. It can be seen as a rational strategy to keep these statelets within the Russian orbit, at minimal cost. The client-states are completely dependent upon Russian support, militarily, economically and politically, but at the same time wary of high-handed treatment by their powerful patron. The Abkhazians, in particular, guard their independence jealously: all leading politicians must convince the voting public that they are able to stand up to any kind of Russian pressure, while at the same time retaining Russian support. In Transnistria and South Ossetia the situation is slightly different: here the political hopefuls fall over each other in trying to convince the electorate that they – and not their rivals – are highly trusted in Moscow. However, the lessons to be drawn are fairly similar in all cases: regardless of who wins elections in the client-states, defection from Russia is not on the cards, and by supporting no one in particular the Kremlin ensures that it will be able to

work smoothly with the new head of state from Day One. Any kind of puppeteering may, while not leading to any desire to break off ties with Russia, too easily produce resentment among large segments of the population. It is simply more advantageous to pose as a benevolent patron of attraction than a domineering patron of coercion. As Andre Gerrits and Max Bader (2016, p. 308) note,

Probably because there is no alternative to Russia's patronage for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, however, there is no disagreement among political forces in the two regions regarding Russia's role. All major political forces and politicians welcome Russia's involvement, and none of these forces envisions a future return to the Georgian state. As a consequence, there is no urgency for Russia to greatly interfere in electoral processes or micromanage the politics of the regions. In a sense, it matters little to Moscow who wins elections in the regions, as all major candidates and parties will depend on Russian financial aid and other forms of assistance if they win the elections.

In the scholarly debate on 'black knights' much of the material mustered by both sides may be regarded as equivocal. It can be interpreted as showing that Russia and other authoritarian states are driven by the urge to export their autocratic political system to as many states as possible. Alternatively, it may be seen as being more narrowly concerned with promoting their own interests in an attempt to ensure that neighbouring countries remain friendly or at least not hostile.

In this situation, I hold, an analysis of political developments in the three post-Soviet de facto states that have Russia as their patron can offer interesting insights. These states are totally dependent upon Russian support as regards security and economic survival; therefore, in

designing policy, the Kremlin can leave out of the equation any need to woo or force them to become friendly nations. While Moscow could no doubt have imposed Russia-style autocracy on these statelets, there is no need for this. That Russia so conspicuously abstains from exporting autocracy in situations when it could easily have done so would indicate that such activity does not have high priority in Moscow. The puzzling question, perhaps, is not why or how Russia can tolerate a higher degree of democracy in ‘its’ de-facto state clients than the Russians enjoy, but why it took so long before this insight dawned on the leadership.

Epilogue: in April 2018 Armenia’s strongman president Serzh Sarkisyan was peacefully removed from office after protracted street demonstrations in what many observers regarded as another ‘colour revolution’. Moscow’s calm attitude was widely perceived as being out of character, since the Russian elite has been regarded as obdurately set against against democratic upheavals of any kind in the neighbourhood. The most probable reason for Moscow’s unexpected equanimity is that Armenia is almost as dependent upon Russian support—militarily, economically and geopolitically—as are the three de facto states examined here. As noted by the correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, ‘While [Armenia’s] government might become more democratic, Armenia’s reliance on Russia for trade and security will not change’ (Aleksanyan 2018). Armenia’s new national leader, Nikol Pashinyan, immediately flew to Sochi to assure President Putin that ‘in Armenia there is a consensus and nobody has ever doubted the importance of the strategic nature of Armenia—Russian relations’ (Osborn 2018). This again seems to underline that for Russia it is vital to be surrounded by friendly states, whereas the democratic or authoritarian quality of these states is of secondary importance.

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