

Legitimizing the Separatist Cause: Nation-building in the Eurasian *de facto* States

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Abstract

This article compares the nation-building processes in four well-established Eurasian *de facto* states. Although all four pursue a set of identity politics that would legitimize the separatist cause, comparing them reveals important differences in boundary-making strategies. While maintaining the image of the enemy parent-state and of an imminent external threat is a common endeavor, they face different challenges and thus have pursued different strategies of identity-building. Transnistria and Abkhazia are two ethnically heterogeneous entities while Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia are more homogeneous since (forced) displacements, mostly of non-titular ethnicities, took place. The Abkhazs, Ossetians, and Armenians claim titular status in their respective regions, but only the latter two have kin in neighboring countries with whom they want to unify. Meanwhile, the “Transnistrian people” is a newly invented construct. Despite their lack of international recognition, the article demonstrates that – apart from a special emphasis on cultivating the image of the “enemy parent-state” – the nation-building mechanisms in the *de facto* states do not substantially differ from the processes at work in other post-Soviet states presented in this Special Issue.

Keywords: nation-building; *de facto* states; Eurasia; Transnistria; Abkhazia; Nagorno-Karabakh; South Ossetia

In September 2020, both Tiraspol and Tskhinvali celebrated 30 years of “independence.” One year later, in September 2021, it was the turn of Stepanakert, as it will be for Sukhum/i in July 2022. These self-proclaimed independences were followed by the early 1990s civil wars in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova that ended with the *de facto* separation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, respectively. Since then, the resolution of these conflicts has typically been described as “frozen.” Meanwhile, the separatist regions all developed features of statehood but – not being recognized as such *de jure* – they constitute so-called “*de facto* states” (Pegg 1998). Aspiring to international recognition – or recognition of their separation and subsequent integration with a kin or patron – *de facto* states invoke the principle of self-determination of peoples and point to their internal legitimacy (Berg and Molder 2012; Caspersen 2012), that is, “people’s acceptance and loyalty to the ruling authority” (Bakke, O’Loughlin, Toal, and Ward 2014, 592). Such legitimacy depends on the capacity of the authorities to provide for security and welfare (output legitimacy) as well as on their ability to construct and nurture “a shared identity and a sense of unity in a state’s population [identity legitimacy], through education, propaganda, ideology, and state symbols” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 484).

This article looks into the latter part of internal legitimacy and compares the nation-building processes in four well-established Eurasian *de facto* states – only briefly introducing, in the concluding remarks, nation-building in the two *de facto* states in Eastern Ukraine, Luhansk and

Donetsk, before the 2022 war. Although all four pursue a set of identity politics that aims at legitimizing the separatist cause – as in the case of other post-Soviet states that “have chosen different models of nation-building” (Kolstø 2000, 9) – they face different challenges and thus have pursued different strategies. Transnistria and Abkhazia are two ethnically heterogeneous entities while Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia are more homogeneous since (forced) displacements, mostly of non-titular ethnicities, took place. The Abkhazs, Ossetians, and Armenians claim titular status in their respective regions, but only the latter two have kin in neighboring countries with whom they want to unify. Meanwhile, the “Transnistrian people” is a newly invented construct. Despite their lack of international recognition, the nation-building mechanisms in the de facto states do not substantially differ from the processes at work in other post-Soviet states presented in this Special Issue. Whereas previous comparative studies of post-Soviet nation-building (Smith [ed.] 1995; Bremmer and Taras 1997; Smith, Law, Wilson, Bohr, and Allworth 1998; Kolstø 2000) did not include these enduring entities, the aim of this article is to add these to the overall “record of the different roads to self-assertion and independence being pursued by these young nations” (Bremmer and Taras 1997, back cover).

Legitimizing the Separatist Cause: A Process of Boundary-Making

De facto states are entities with an “organized political leadership, which has risen to power through some degree of indigenous capacity, receives popular support and has achieved sufficient capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a specific territorial area, over which effective control is maintained for a significant period of time” but which “remains illegitimate in the eyes of international society” (Pegg 1998, 26). At first, in the 1990s, de facto states in the post-Soviet space were widely seen as “black holes,” zones of crime and illegality. As argued by Charles King (2001, 525), they represent successful cases of states born out of war where actors on both sides of the conflict “benefit from the untaxed trade and production flowing through the former war zones.” However, as of early 2010s, the literature takes a more nuanced view of the dynamic processes of state- and nation-formation, which are indispensable for the de facto state’s survival (Kolstø and Paukovic 2014). Indeed, Nina Caspersen (2008, 114) observes a change “in the legitimising strategy adopted by the leaders of unrecognized states,” where the claim to the right to self-determination has been replaced by the claim that they have now “proven their viability as democratic states and thereby *earned* their sovereignty.”

Hence, the argument of internal legitimacy is put forward. Internal legitimacy can be further disaggregated: state legitimacy is the belief that the political entity has the right to an independent state; regime legitimacy is the extent of trust the elite in power enjoys; and institutional legitimacy is the people’s positive view of the workings of the state apparatus (Bakke, O’Loughlin, Toal, and Ward 2014, 593). How the state, the regime, and the bureaucracy are perceived at the society level depends on democratic practices, economic, and physical security (output legitimacy or “hard” aspects of state construction), and on collective identity. The latter (identity legitimacy) depends on the “soft” aspects of state construction, the “construction of a shared identity and a sense of unity in a state’s population” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 484; Soifer and Vom Hau 2008). Even though only by studying the combining effects (legitimacy) of output and identity legitimization strategies can we account for de facto states’ existence in the long-run (see Dembińska 2021), in line with the theme of this Special issue, the article limits the analysis to the identity legitimization only. It is argued that in de facto states these strategies, in addition to the standard nation-building techniques well known from elsewhere, include cultivating the (manufactured/perceived) fear of continuous ethnic discrimination by the parent-state to justify their separatist cause. Lacking external legitimacy and being largely dependent on a patron-state, de facto states are vulnerable and their populations’ welfare and well-being fragile. Achieving output legitimacy represents a

major challenge. In this context, the emphasis on the “enemy parent-state” turns out to be particularly important to justify separation.

Other than security and welfare provisions (scarce that they may be), internal legitimacy depends thus on nation-building strategies and on how these are received at the society level. Nation-building is a group differentiation process involving boundary-making (Barth 1969). These boundaries delimit socially constructed identity categories, which are infused with ethnic/national attributes (such as traditions, language, historiography) by ethnic organizations, intellectuals, and elites who provide for the category’s institutionalization and who ensure “groupness” (Brubaker 2006; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). This article examines the “dynamics of group-making as a social and political project” by focusing on “the politics of categories from above,” that is on how categories are produced, transformed, and institutionalized (Brubaker 2006, 12–13).

A set of different strategies can be put in motion while undertaking such a project. Shifting boundaries that would change the topography of ethnic groups is one of them and consists either in boundary expansion or in boundary contraction (Wimmer 2013). The former rests on the fusion of ethnic categories into a more encompassing one; the latter on the fission of a category into two distinct ones. The choice of the strategy depends on power relations, demographic structures, and the needs of the moment (Schöpflin 2000, 98). Changing strategies in the process is possible because “within every ethnic community there are competing conceptions of descent, authentic history, culture and the territorial domain [...] that generate rival symbolic and political projects” (Hutchinson 2000, 661). These conceptions are based on myth-symbol complexes, which are the interpretations of a community’s history by the community itself and are thus flexible (Kaufman 2001; Kolstø 2000).

In order to gain internal legitimacy – that is, popular support for their separatist cause – de facto states embark upon such a boundary-making project, choosing suitable strategies and mechanisms from the repertoire. While “the mere fact of existing for a few decades [...] may be enough to establish at least a passive identification with [the state]” (Hobsbawm 1990, 86), institutions can be also exploited actively through a set of identity politics that activates new boundary-formation. As elaborated elsewhere (Dembińska 2012), citizenship laws indicate who is and is not part of the political/national community; language and education laws define the status of respective groups and their hierarchy that is in-the-making; historiography is used to invent traditions (Hobsbawm 1990) or re-imagine myths of nationhood (Smith 1999). The separatist cause needs constant reminder of the threat parent-states represent, and the victorious civil wars constitute major events easily connected to the memories of violence and glory. “The image of ‘the enemy’ – both external and internal – is used as a mechanism to legitimize and hold onto power, regardless of the quality and their [those holding power] achievements” (Baghdasaryan 2013, 105).

The process of boundary-making is twofold: the enemy image of the parent-state is maintained – a strategy particularly important for de facto states in their pursuit of the legitimation of the separatist cause – while a sense of collective identity is cultivated. These two processes – part of internal legitimation strategies – are systematically taken up in each case examined here and vary across the four cases. In Transnistria, the construction of a “supra-ethnic people” goes together with efforts to distinguish Transnistrian Moldovans from Bessarabian/Romanian Moldovans. The Abkhaz nationalizing state (Brubaker 1996) keeps solid boundaries of the titular nation while including minorities into a broader political collective identity category of Abkhazians and trying to cope with the Georgian/Mingrelian minority, otherwise presented as the “enemy within” (for a detailed account of these processes in Transnistria and in Abkhazia, see Dembińska 2019 and 2021). In Nagorno-Karabakh – at least till the 2020 war – some ambiguity persists as to the independent/irredentist cause, together with some signs of boundary-making within the “multilocal” nation of Armenians. In South Ossetia, the nation-building process is in limbo – awaiting reunification with North Ossetia within the Russian Federation – and no separate identity legitimation effort has been undertaken.

Supra-Ethnic Transnistrian Nation

The 1990s conflict in Moldova was not immanently ethnic. The separatist region of Transnistria is mostly Russophone but ethnically heterogeneous, and the Transnistrian identity category did not exist prior to the 1990s. The region was part of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) within the Ukrainian SSR, created in 1924 as a response to the integration of Bessarabia (part of the Russian Empire since 1812) in Greater Romania following World War I. The Soviet Moldovan identity doctrine – that is, the fission of the Romanian category and the manufacturing of the Moldovan through the use of the Cyrillic script (Shrad 2004, 457) – was to justify the integration of Bessarabia into the USSR in 1940 and the establishment of the Moldavian SSR with Moldovans as the titular nation, distinct from Romanians. During perestroika, Chisinau took up a pro-Romanian rhetoric, and, in 1989, it legislated in favor of changing the state language to Moldovan/Romanian (Kaufman and Bowers 1998). In response, the Russophone industrial and military personnel in Tiraspol proclaimed a separate republic (King 2001, 532–533). A short war followed in 1991 and ended with a ceasefire in 1992.

The 1989 census in what was to become Transnistria found Moldovans constituted 39.9 percent of the population, Russians 30.5 percent, and Ukrainians 28.3 percent. According to the latest census conducted in 2004, representatives of Moldovans, Russians, and Ukrainians made up 31.9 percent, 30.4 percent, and 28.8 percent of the region's population. According to data published by Tiraspol, Comai and Venturi (2015, 892) conclude that these proportions did not change much in the following decade. Thus, the Transnistrian elites cannot mobilize the people with ethnic slogans. Two strategies are deployed to legitimize the separatist cause: the construction of a distinct Transnistrian identity category by boundary expansion and the making of a contracted boundary that would separate “our” Moldovans from right-bank Bessarabian Moldova.

Separatist Cause Justified: The Transnistrian People

At first, the separatist cause was justified along linguistic and Moldovanist lines. Anticipating change of their social and political status in an independent (pro-Romanian) Republic of Moldova, Transnistrian elites opted for defending the Russian language and “true” Moldovans, those who use Cyrillic and who distance themselves from Romania (Matsuzato 2008, 95; Dembińska and Danero Iglesias 2013). In the mid-1990s, Chisinau changed direction away from pro-Romanianism, so the Transnistrian elite adjusted its discourse and constructed social cohesion around the separatist cause in economic terms. Compared to Moldova, it was argued, Transnistria was a prosperous “Riviera” (Popescu 2006). Subsequently, since 2001 and the adoption of the Moldovanist (or rather neo-Moldovanist, March 2007) identity doctrine in Chisinau, ideologues in Tiraspol came to the conclusion that promoting Moldovanism in Transnistria was “incorrect and pointless” (Galinsky 2007). Instead, they began institutionalizing and propagating the category of “Transnistrian people,” a Soviet-like political community equally made up of ethnic Moldovans, Russians, and Ukrainians, and distinct from Moldovans across the de facto border.

The Russian language dominates all spheres of life in Transnistria, though there are three official languages: Russian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian (Dembińska and Danero 2013; Osipov and Vasilevich 2019). Transnistria adopted a distinctive flag and coat of arms reminiscent of the Moldavian ASSR symbols and its own Transnistrian ruble. History was invested with new narratives and is recounted in numerous volumes that “prove” the existence and *longue durée* of the “Transnistrian nation.” Generally, four historical myths serve the objective of constructing the Transnistrian people's category and distinguishing it from the right-bank Moldova.

First, the origin myth accounts for a territorially based Transnistrian identity, which formed throughout centuries of interaction of ethnic groups at the border between Slavic and Romance cultures. Transnistrians are an “outpost” and “bulwark” of “Orthodox Slavic civilization.” Incidentally, de facto President, elected in 2016, Vadim Krasnoselski puts much emphasis on Transnistria's position within the *Russkiy Mir* (Marandici 2020), a cultural Russian civilization (Oleksy

2016; Laruelle 2015). The different ethnicities “are depicted as peacefully coexisting, interacting, and ‘assimilating’ (each other?), thus forming ‘the [Transnistrian] community’” (Solonari 2003, 432). Slavs, however, are seen as the first settlers in the region, Moldovans showing up at least one thousand years later (Solonari 2003, 428). The myth goes on, maintaining that the first Transnistrian statehood in 1924 (an autonomous republic within the Ukrainian SSR) was “artificially” named the *Moldavian* Autonomous SSR (Voronivich 2014).

Second, there is the myth of the Soviet period as Transnistria’s Golden Age, which serves to explain the difference between residents on left- versus right-bank Moldova. Transnistria, it is argued, was much more industrialized, urbanized, and educated than agrarian Bessarabia (Volkova 2005, 36), thereby accounting for different mentalities.

Third, there is the myth of victimhood associated with the 1941–1944 Nazi occupation, carried out by Bessarabian Moldovans serving in the Romanian army (Cojocaru 2006, 264). Thus, “Romanian” evokes images of “invader,” “enemy,” and “fascist” (Dembińska and Danero 2013). Victory Day (9 May) signifies the “liberation of the Transnistrian people” from the “fascist threat” (Cojocaru and Suhan 2006, 157–158), and the 1992 war confirms the constant aggressive attitude of Moldovan Bessarabian national-fascist authorities (Cojocaru and Suhan 2006, 157; Svet 2013, 111). Each March 2, de facto President Krasnoselski solemnly commemorates the Massive Resistance to the Aggression by Moldova (Marandici 2020).

Finally, the myth of national liberation is associated with the 1991–1992 war. It epitomizes conflicting Moldovan and Transnistrian national/political trajectories and projects, and the unity of the Transnistrian people: “people living on the left shore of Dniester were able to unite and halt the military aggression of Moldovan nationalism against the rights and liberties of Soviet people [...] To defend their homes, their land, stood all citizens of the republic, the guardsmen, militia, the Cossacks, Moldavians, Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians and other citizens of our towns and villages” (PMR President website, not available anymore).¹ Significantly, the narrative stresses the ethnic composition of the first three war victims: a Ukrainian, a Russian, and a Moldovan.

“Our True” Moldovans and the Enemy Bessarabian/Romanian Moldova

Perceiving Chisinau as Romanianizing, in March 1991, the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet adopted a resolution on “Urgent Measures for the Preservation of the Originality of Moldovans, their Language, and Culture.” Legitimizing the separatist cause along Moldovanist lines, Transnistria was pictured as the only guardian of the true Moldovan identity (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2011, 178). Despite the above-mentioned subsequent adjustments, Moldovan language is still a fundamental component of Transnistrian identity, and the Cyrillic script is its key defining feature (Comai and Venturi 2015, 891). Because history textbooks in Moldova tell the Romanian story and because they are written in Latin script, they are not allowed in Moldovan-language schools in Transnistria (Shornikov 2007, 345–346). As a result, pupils are exposed to Soviet-inspired historical myths that would distance them from the “fascist Romanians”/Bessarabian Moldovans.

There was an attempt at “linguistic cleansing” in 2004 when Transnistrian authorities closed Moldovan schools that continued to use the Latin alphabet (Roper 2005). That, together with pragmatic reasons – social mobility and job opportunities – convinced most Moldovans to attend Russian-speaking schools (Dembińska and Danero 2013). According to official Transnistrian statistics, Russian is the language of instruction in 82 percent of the schools and Moldavian (written in Cyrillic) in 13.5 percent (Comai and Venturi 2015; Osipov and Vasilevich 2019). In line with the official position of Tiraspol on the equal promotion of the ethnicities that make up Transnistria, in 2014 the Minister of Education Svetlana Fadeeva asserted that “preventing further reduction of the number of pupils obtaining their education through Moldovan and Ukrainian [was] a priority [...] This should be achieved, among other things, by increasing the availability of Moldovan (Cyrillic script) schools in areas where ‘Romanian’ (Latin script) schools are available” (quoted in Comai and

Venturi 2015, 892) – thus further eroding fluency in Moldovan/Romanian and dissociating “our true” Moldovans from the Bessarabian Moldovans (Dembińska 2019).

Transnistrian education is closely integrated with the Russian system (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2011, 195). Russian is the chosen language of expression for Transnistrian artists and writers seeking a broader audience. Russification is under way and – although distinctive – the Transnistrian identity is understood as a “drop within the Russian cultural home” (author’s interview with a Tiraspol university professor, June 2011; Marandici 2020). While the Transnistrian authorities claim statehood, referring to the 2006 referendum, when 97 percent of the population expressed their willingness for either independence or integration with Russia, they aspire at becoming an exclave of the Russian Federation.

However, while Transnistria is culturally linked to Russia, and also dependent on Russian subsidies and security guarantees, with over 66 percent of exports going westward in 2021 (including Moldova), Transnistrian economic ties, and thus its output legitimacy, heavily depends on Europe (Dembińska 2021). The 2014 EU Association Agreement with Moldova, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), covers Transnistria (Dembińska and Mérand 2019). Tiraspol’s position on the 2022 war in Ukraine is interesting: while Abkhazia and South Ossetia support Russia’s invasion “and wholeheartedly adopt Kremlin’s narrative, Transnistria is not. Yet, in the past this pro-Russian separatist region of Moldova backed Moscow on every step: recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – Tiraspol even took that opportunity to ask Russia for annexation too” (Dembińska 2022). This complicates the image of a Transnistria turned unequivocally toward Russia. Status quo may actually favor de facto authorities in Tiraspol.

The Abkhaz Quest for Sovereignty

In contrast to Transnistria, Abkhazia was granted the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921, though degraded in 1931 to the status of an Autonomous Republic within the Georgian SSR. The separatist war with Georgia in 1992–1993 was pursued in the name of the sovereignty of the Abkhaz people, even though the ethnic Abkhazs represented only 17.8 percent of the region’s 525,000 population (1989 census). While Georgians were massively displaced from Abkhazia during the war, it is a unique case where some internally displaced people returned (some 44,000–60,000 Georgians/Mingrelians) and now make up a majority of the inhabitants of the Gal/i region in the south-east of Abkhazia (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2011).

According to the censuses carried out in 2003 and in 2011, ethnic Abkhazs amounted to 43.8 percent and 50.7 percent of the population respectively, though these numbers are debatable (Comai and Venturi 2015, 895). With Georgians/Mingrelians accounting for some 20 percent of the population, Armenians 17–20 percent, and Russians 10 percent, Abkhazia is an ethnically diverse society, with an important section of the population associated with “war enemies.” Nation-building is ambiguously binary: on the one hand, the position and status of the ethnic Abkhazs on “their own” territory has to be affirmed (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2013); on the other hand, in order to comply with “earned sovereignty” and internal legitimacy requirements, inclusive policies towards non-titular minorities are pursued through boundary expansion – a contested cultivation of an inclusive Abkhazian people category (Dembińska 2019).

Separatist Cause Justified: The Enemy Georgia on “Our” Land

The Abkhazs see the Georgian state as “imperialist,” and ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia before the war as settlers sent by Stalin and Beria to outnumber the Abkhazs (Nodia 1997; Gitsba 2013). Moreover, the Georgian authorities are regarded as guilty of discrimination in economic, political, and cultural spheres, including restricting the use of the Abkhaz language. The conflict with Georgia is about the “ownership” of this “indivisible territory” (Toft 2003). Abkhaz elites who

celebrate “1,200 years of independent statehood” (Dale 1997, 59) insist on an Abkhaz presence in the region long before the Common Era (BCE). The medieval Abkhaz Kingdom served as its founding political entity. The nature of this state is contested. The Abkhaz narrative posits that it was a genuinely Abkhaz entity as it was under the reign of the Abkhaz dynasty. The Georgian narrative emphasizes the use of Georgian as this state’s language, used to assert their dominance over the region. History textbooks published in Abkhazia affirm, however, that “as it is widely acknowledged, the Abkhaz language is one of the oldest languages in the world” (Rouvinski 2007, 7). The myth of victimhood is symbolized by the use of terms like “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” in “reference to specific acts of violence” that took place during the 1992–1993 civil war (Dale 1997, 60–61). Abkhaz public spaces are replete with visual reminders of the war, from war-destroyed buildings to graffiti (Sabirova 2008, 52). In that context, any attempt at normalizing relations with Tbilisi faces fierce opposition (Kotova 2021).

The Abkhazs, the Abkhazian People, and the “Enemy Within”

Multiethnicity in Abkhazia is affirmed in the constitution, and provisions to protect minority groups are in place (Comai and Venturi 2015, 896). At the same time, however, the “ethno-nationalist discourse [...] dominates the state building project” (Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010, 9). The Abkhaz language is the only state language (though Russian can be used in governmental institutions and official matters) and the president of the “republic” must be an ethnic Abkhaz, fluent in Abkhaz (Ó Beacháin 2012, 172).

Some groups are less accepted into the Abkhazian political community than others. According to the 2005 Law on Citizenship, regardless of where they reside, ethnic Abkhazs may obtain Abkhazian citizenship automatically, whereas non-ethnic Abkhazs only become citizens automatically if they “resided in Abkhazia for at least five years at the time of Abkhazia’s declaration of independence in 1999” (HRW 2011, 31). This provision bars Gal/i residents from citizenship because they were dislocated in 1992–1993. Any amendments aimed at easing the process of the naturalization of the Gal/i population – as proposed by de facto President Bagapsh (2005–2011) or more recently by de facto President Bzhania, elected in 2020 – is strongly contested as it is seen as “betraying national interests” (Khintba 2011, 11; Kotova 2020). The emphasis placed on the inclusive category of *Abkhazians* has increased since the Russo-Georgian 2008 war, the Moscow recognition of Abkhazia, and the agreement with Russia on border controls at the administrative border line (ABL) with Georgia proper, which together reduced the perception of external threat. The de facto authorities have been “partly successful in building a common political (nation) identity shared not only by ethnic Abkhazs but also by Armenians and Russians” (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2011, 25). The same cannot be said of Georgians: “The Armenians do not question whose land this is” (Tsiklauri quoted in Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2013, 2091); Georgians do.

Thus, inclusion of Georgians into the Abkhazian *demos* is a contested issue (Dembińska 2019). Those wedded to the security threat discourse frame Gal/i residents as Georgians, and thus a “fifth column;” while those who wish to present Abkhazia as a multinational state define Gal/i residents as Mingrelians, a distinct ethnicity that may be integrated into the Abkhazian political community (Matsuzato 2011, 812). Who Mingrelians are is itself the subject of political and academic disputes. The Georgian nation is a result of history-long processes of merging Kartlians, Kakhetians, Svans, Lazs, Imeretians, Adjars, Batsbi, and Mingrelians. The latter, who live in the northwestern region of Georgia (including Gal/i), speak a specific ethnolect that is not literary and that is depicted as a dialect of Georgian (Broers 2001). In the context of the “frozen conflict,” it is instrumental for Georgia to identify the Gal/i population as Georgians. From the Tbilisi standpoint, “their identity is being manipulated by the Abkhazs who are creating an artificial distinction between Mingrelian and Georgian identity and interests” (Conciliation Resources 2015, 11). From the Abkhaz perspective, the historical myth of “trustworthy Mingrelians” goes as follows: “Mingrelians are different from Georgians. We fought with the latter, not the former [...] Mingrelians have been a

native population in southeast Abkhazia, while the Georgians, who began to settle [...] after 1937, were artificial immigrants mobilized [...] for the purpose of Georgianizing Abkhazia” (Matsuzato 2011, 815).

Education in minority languages is guaranteed in Abkhazia’s educational system, but Georgian language schools are continuously under strain (Comai and Venturi 2015, 898). Textbooks published in Georgia, particularly history and geography, cannot be used (Clogg 2008, 316). Georgian schools in Gal/i are ever scarcer: in 2011, there were just 11 Georgian-language schools left (HRW 2011, 50 and 53). These are, however, being gradually replaced by Russian-speaking schools, where one hour per week of Georgian is taught as a foreign language. Their final closure is scheduled for 2022 (Gogua 2019; Zurabashvili 2016). A member of the Center for Humanitarian Programs in Sukhum/i (author’s interview, May 23, 2013) confessed that studying in Abkhazia is challenging for Georgian/Mingrelians: “In their first year, the only language they speak is Mingrelian; they do not speak Abkhaz, Russian, or Georgian.” In the past, young people from Gal/i left to study in Zugdidi or Tbilisi but this option is slowly disappearing as linguistic competence in Georgian is supplanted by Russian (HRW 2011, 49). Russian-language Abkhazian higher education institutions receive, therefore, increasing numbers of Georgians/Mingrelians (Conciliation Resources 2015, 11).

Whereas Georgian is being forced out and Russian language introduced, Mingrelian attributes are being promoted from above. The publication of *Gal Gazeta*, a Mingrelian-Russian-Abkhaz trilingual journal, is one example of the efforts made to propagate Mingrelian as a literary language. The author’s extensive interview with its chief editor, an ethnic Abkhaz who does not speak Mingrelian, reveals the political dimension of the endeavor (Gal/i, 27 May 2013): this Abkhaz journalist was mandated by the former de facto president to “try to do something in their own [Mingrelian] language.” Since Mingrelian is not a literary language, a script had to be chosen and the language standardized. “We chose the Georgian alphabet” as the most fitting for Mingrelian phonetics. Asked about the readership, the editor said Mingrelians in Gal/i “identified themselves with Georgians. Therefore, they were surprised when they first read the journal that it was in Mingrelian.” The interviewee claimed how “For 80 years they were told they were Georgians, it is not easy now to change this drastically.” He expressed solidarity with Mingrelians because Abkhaz had experienced Georgian oppression too. He said “We want this region to integrate the Abkhaz society. We view them as equal citizens of Abkhazia similar to Armenians, Greeks, Russians” (Dembińska 2019, 310).

However dependent on its patron-state, Russia, for its survival (Dembińska 2021), Abkhazia is seeking sovereign rule by the Abkhazs’ titular ethnic nation in what amounts to an ethnocracy, while at the same time creating opportunities for minorities to participate. Contested – especially during Raul Khajimba’s presidency (2014–2019) – the strategy is to dissociate Gal/i Mingrelians/Georgians from the “enemy” Georgians on the other side of the administrative border.

Karabakhi Armenians: Irredentism and Independence in Flux

When the Russian Empire collapsed, the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over control of Nagorno-Karabakh, inhabited by 89 percent Armenians and 10 percent Azeris, was “resolved” in 1923 when Moscow established the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) within the Union Republic of Azerbaijan (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 486–487). Since then, the region was a constant object of discord between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which erupted during the perestroika period: a vote by Armenian deputies in NKAO for unification with the Armenian SSR in 1988 provoked violent ethnic clashes, followed in September 1991 by the unilateral declaration of an independent Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). The subsequent civil war ended with a ceasefire in 1994. Since then, and till November 2020, besides controlling nearly the totality of the former NKAO territory, the Karabakhis were in charge (fully or partially) of seven districts of Azerbaijan situated around and between this former enclave and Armenia. These territories were considered

(at least until the adoption of the 2006 Constitution) as a bargaining chip in peace negotiations (with the exception of the Lachin land corridor that links NKR and its kin-state Armenia). Since the 2020 armed conflict with Azerbaijan and the signature of another ceasefire, most of these districts are no longer under Karabakhi control.

Similar to the Abkhaz, Armenians were awarded an autonomous region in the Soviet Union, and they fought against Azerbaijan in the name of the Armenian people. But NKR nation-building policies differ considerably. Two main elements account for this: the presence of a kin-state and the homogeneity of Nagorno-Karabakh after the civil war. The 1989 Soviet census reported that Armenians made up 76.9 percent of the NKAO population and Azeris 21.5 percent, but due to the exodus of Azeris during the conflict, the 2005 NKR census found 99.7 percent of the population were Armenians (with only six persons identifying themselves as Azeri; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 486–487). In contrast to Abkhazia and Transnistria, then, the Karabakh authorities do not have to contend with internal ethnic cleavages.

Rather, Nagorno-Karabakh's enemy is "only" external, and nation-building is dominated by the perceived (turned real in 2020) threat from Azerbaijan. Identity legitimization of the de facto state reflects the ambiguity of Nagorno-Karabakh aspirations: unification with Armenia or independence. It oscillates between an all-encompassing Armenian identity category and drawing a division that recognizes some distinctive features of Karabakhi Armenians – leaving Karabakh with a type of "waiting-room nation-building" (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012, 288). As in the cases presented above, shifts in Karabakhi nation-building policies point to the dynamic nature of internal developments within de facto states. How legitimization policies will evolve after the 2020 war – especially given the massive exodus of Armenians from the region and the loss of territories that are now back under Baku's control – is still to be seen and too recent to be accounted for in this article ("Salvage" 2020).

Separatist Cause Justified: The Enemy "Turk"

As with Transnistria and Abkhazia, the history writing of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, and Azerbaijan is highly politicized, contributing to a "radicalization of mutual mistrust" (Ayunts, Zakaryan, and Zolyan 2016, 1). "Armenians and Azerbaijanis developed ethno-histories and myths of ethnogenesis to justify their territorial claims to the homeland of which Karabakh was an inseparable part" (Geukjian 2012, 20; see also Laycock 2020). Throughout history, the Christian Apostolic Armenians and the Muslim, Turkic-speaking Azeris have populated Nagorno-Karabakh (Broers 2019). The Azeri historiography asserts that the region was mostly Muslim until the Russian Empire took control of Karabakh in 1805 and then settled there Armenian immigrants from the Ottoman Empire and Persia (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 486–487). In the Armenian/Karabakhi version, as studied by Gamaghelyan and Romyantsev (2013, 174), Azeris are absent from the textbooks that cover the ancient period and are thus considered to be latecomers or invaders. Overall, a clear boundary is delineated between "us" Christian Armenians and "them:" the Azerbaijanis, and more generally all non-Christian Arabs, Mongols, and Turks that have occupied "our" motherland. This myth of victimization runs parallel to the myth of continuous, glorious, and heroic struggle for liberation. In sum, textbooks "place the conflict in a context of centuries-long occupation, the division of Armenia by various empires, and the struggle for survival" (Gamaghelyan and Romyantsev 2013, 175).

In the Karabakh dialect, the term for "Azerbaijani" is "Tork," which derives from "Turk;" Turks and Azerbaijanis make up a "two-headed monster" (Baghdasaryan 2013, 95; Novikova 2012, 552). The image of an enemy Azerbaijan is perpetuated in the Karabakh media where it is termed an "aggressor country." Azerbaijanis are described as "cavemen capable of all kinds of beastliness and vandalism" (Baghdasaryan 2013, 99–100). It is hardly surprising that young people who never met an Azeri perceive them as a threat and consider it unimaginable to reintegrate into Azerbaijan (Baghdasaryan 2013, 98). These strategies of myth formation "led the two societies towards the

Second [2020] Karabakh War” (Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2021, 1). At the time of writing, this war is too recent for the hostile narratives to have any chance to decrease.

“Multilocal” Armenian Nation: “Pure” Karabakhis on Sacred Land

Arguably, the NKR holds all the institutional attributes of an independent state (Pokalova 2015, 78–80). Analysts agree, however, that in practice the NKR constitutes a region of Armenia (Panossian 2001, 150–151). It is fully dependent on the financial support of the Armenian diaspora and its kin-patron-state, Armenia, with which it has an integrated economy and intertwined politics. For an extended period, it was actually Karabakhis that monopolized power and controlled the Armenian agenda: Robert Kocharian, the elected President of Karabakh, became Prime Minister of Armenia in 1997 and then President (1998–2008), before being succeeded by another Karabakhi, Serzh Sargsyan (2008–2018); the list of Karabakhis exercising power positions in Erevan continues (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012, 291–294; Panossian 2001, 152; Kopeček 2020). Karabakhis are citizens of Armenia and hold Armenian passports, and the preamble of the 2006 Constitution stresses the unity of all Armenian people (Berg and Molder 2012, 534).

Such unity, and the quest for reunification with Armenia, was the main goal of Karabakhi political elites for some 20 years. The consolidation of NKR institutions and the referendum in 2006 resulted in the adoption of a new constitution (Pokalova 2015, 69). Integrating with Armenia has been then revised and “only one small party in NKR [was] openly arguing for unification, while all the others officially [fought] for recognition of the NKR as a separate state” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 502). This reflected societal preferences: public opinion polls in the mid-2000s revealed a split within society with a narrow majority favoring independence (Baghdasarian 2005, 23). In February 2020 (a few months before the war), 33 percent of Karabakhi respondents preferred unification, while 55 percent did not (Bakke, Toal, and O’Loughlin 2020). According to Baghdasaryan (2013, 106), “many people believe that it is unacceptable that the Armenian administration has in practice monopolized the right to settle the Nagorny Karabakh problem itself.” Still, ambiguity as to Karabakhi authorities’ exact objectives persist.

Nation-building is thus two-fold and reflects Wimmers’ modification of the meaning of the ethnic-boundary and the hierarchies within (2013, 73). It simultaneously aims at maintaining the larger category of ethnic Armenians where “the people of NKR are said to be Armenians, pure and simple” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 500), while developing distinctive features of Karabakhi Armenians as “the defenders and consciousness of the Armenian nation” (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012, 288). Symbolic politics reflect this ambiguity: while separate NKR postal stamps have been introduced, there is no separate currency; the NKR flag is the same Armenian tricolor, enhanced only with a traditional Nagorno-Karabakh handicraft sign (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 501) – a white zigzag line symbolizing the (unwanted) separation of Armenian lands.

Emphasis on Karabakhi Armenians may be understood in what Panossian terms a “multilocal” path to Armenian nation-building, due to the scattered nature of Armenian communities (quoted in Broers and Toal 2013, 18) composed of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Armenian diaspora (Baghdasaryan 2013, 106). While Armenians in the NKR are an integral part of the Armenian ethnic nation (O’Loughlin and Kolosov 2017, 705), they are often represented as “purer” than the mainland Armenians (Matsuzato 2008, 98).

The residents of the NKR insist on using the term “Artsakh” instead of “Nagorno-Karabakh” to describe their country (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013a, 159). “Nagorno-Karabakh” is a foreign term resulting from Persian, Turkic, and Russian influences, whereas the former is the ancient Armenian name of the region, which had been a province of the Kingdom of Armenia (2nd century BCE to 4th century CE). The use of “Artsakh” is an act of “purification” and serves as the myth of ethnogenesis, connecting the present with the past and underlining ownership of the region. Karabakhi historiographies as well as the NKR anthem celebrate Artsakh as “an unassailable fortress, a holy peak, a

noble name, a blessing divine, we are made eternal through you” (quoted in Toal and O’Loughlin 2013a, 164).

It is not clear, however, what exact territory is referred to under the term Artsakh. For example, in 2005 archeological excavations on then Armenian-controlled Azerbaijani territory outside NKAO “proved” that this territory was part of the ancient Artsakh (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013a, 164; Broers and Toal 2013). At the same time, Artsakh (NKAO territory plus surrounding areas) – with “rediscovered” and “rehabilitated” monasteries, churches, and archeological sites (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013a, 171) – is “an essential part of the cradle of the Armenian nation’s ethnogenesis” (Vardanyan quoted in Toal and O’Loughlin 2013a, 171). The NKR territory is thus reimaged and nation-builders practice what Broers and Toal term “territorial exhibitionism,” that is, a display of geopolitical maps. Comparing maps from 1999 and 2008, Broers and Toal (2013, 26–27) observe: “[2008] maps of the NKR feature a complete incorporation of the surrounding territories, which are no longer a separate space defined by the borders of the NKAO and denoted by a different color scheme [... .] Armenian toponymy replac[es] Azerbaijani toponyms.” This implies that the occupied non-NKAO areas were no longer considered as a bargaining chip in peace negotiations with Azerbaijan. Following the 2020 war, however, these areas are back under Baku’s control. How they will be reframed in Karabakhi and Armenian narratives is yet to be seen. The separatist cause of the NKR is legitimized by the constant image of the enemy Azerbaijan but there is still no clear direction as to what this de facto state’s future will be, let alone what its nation-building strategy will be.

“Waiting-Room Nation-Building” in the South Ossetian “Black Hole”

The South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (SOAO) within the Georgian SSR was established in 1922. By 1989, the SOAO consisted of 66 percent Ossetians and 29 percent Georgians (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 487). There were 600,000 Ossetians in the USSR; 56 percent of them lived in the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic in the Russian Federation, and 11 percent in South Ossetia. Half of the Georgians and Ossetians in the region were linked through mixed marriages (Toal 2008, 677). In the turmoil of perestroika and the Georgian national movement, SOAO declared the formation of the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic in September 1990. With slogans of “Georgia for Georgians,” Zviad Gamsakurdia, the new nationalist leader in Tbilisi, revoked South Ossetian autonomy and a violent conflict unfolded in 1991 (Lemay-Hebert 2008, 151; German 2016, 157). A few weeks before a ceasefire in June 1992, the South Ossetian parliament unilaterally declared its independence (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 488).

In the aftermath of the secessionist war, relations between South Ossetia and Georgia were characterized by a low level of ethnic tension and a fairly porous mutual border (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012, 287). The South Ossetian authorities did not gain control over the entire territory of the former autonomous region: until the 2008 war, its eastern part, the Akhalkgori region populated mostly by Georgians, remained under Tbilisi’s control. Large-scale displacements occurred in 2008. Whole villages populated by ethnic Georgians fled to Georgia proper while ethnic Ossetians from South Ossetia and other parts of Georgia fled to North Ossetia and elsewhere in Russia (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013b, 137; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 93). According to the 2015 (contested) census, 90 percent of the residents are Ossetians, while some 7 percent are Georgians (Hoch 2020, 77).

The “waiting-room” metaphor applies best in the case of South Ossetia. Like Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia is relatively ethnically homogenous and has an adjacent ethnic kin (though North Ossetia is part of the Russian Federation while Armenia is independent). The difference, however, is in output legitimacy: South Ossetian state capacity is weak. No economic restructuring has taken place and, till 2008 when the administrative border was closed following the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the region profited almost exclusively from illicit trade transiting between Russia and Georgia (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 497). “In recent years, however, the informal trade has grown [again]” (ICG 2018, i). “Even ethnic Ossetian businessmen operating in Russia refrain from

investing” in the region (ICG 2010, 5). Poor socio-economic performance, and thus output legitimacy, is not conducive to a strong sense of South Ossetian solidarity that would justify the claim for independence. South Ossetian political institutions consistently score the lowest of the four Eurasian enduring de facto states (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012, 286; global freedom scored 10/100 by Freedom House in 2020) and focus on personalities (on the role of heroes in South Ossetian political culture, see Kabulov 2013). The affirmation from 2013 stating that South Ossetia is “the least accessible and most unknown externally of the four Eurasian de facto states” (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013b, 138) still holds. It is one of those de facto states that can still be described as a “black hole.” Since the election of Eduard Kokoity in 2001, reelected in 2006, early negotiations with Tbilisi were transformed from a stated objective of independence into a clearly stated objective of the South Ossetian authorities to reunite with North Ossetia and join the Russian Federation (O’Loughlin, Kolosov, and Toal 2014). Little nation-building effort is invested, while South Ossetia waits to be absorbed by its northern neighbor.

The Separatist Cause Justified: The Enemy Georgia

Until 2004, the administrative border between South Ossetia and Georgia was the most permeable among the Eurasian de facto states. From being the most peaceful of the disputed regions, it turned into the most volatile when the marketplace at the Ergneti border-crossing was forcibly closed by Tbilisi, ostensibly to end smuggling and criminality (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 492; Toal 2008, 680). In South Ossetia, it was seen as yet another attack by “chauvinist” Georgia (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 492; German 2016, 157). Predictably, in a November 2006 referendum, 99.9 percent of 55,000 registered voters reaffirmed their wish for independence and secession from Georgia (Toal 2008, 680).

Georgia’s actions under the Saakashvili government have been depicted by the South Ossetians as the third “genocidal” campaign against Ossetians (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013b, 140–143; Hoch 2020, 72–73). The first myth of victimization is associated with the period of 1918–1920 when the Menshevik-controlled Democratic Republic of Georgia (overthrown by the Bolshevik Red Army in 1921) confronted three revolts by Ossetian groups. The second myth is linked to the 1988–1992 period when Georgian nationalism was organic, radical, rejectionist, and romantic, and Ossetians were considered as “ungrateful guests” on historic Georgian soil (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013b, 141). Symbolic public space is invested with statutes and memorials of this period, and the South Ossetian Ministry of the Press and Mass Communications releases memorial books and booklets (even in English) to tell the story of the numerous victims of that time. The third is the period of 2004–2008. Saakashvili’s alleged war on smuggling in Ergneti resulted in the killing of 12 Ossetians. Eduard Kokoity had their bodies put on display in the center of Tskhinval/i (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013b, 143). The August 2008 war, which Ossetians see as a result of Georgian aggression, led to some 2,000 deaths and thousands of displaced people. As with Transnistrian historiography targeting Moldovan aggression, Georgian nationalism is said to be “fascist,” Saakashvili is compared to Hitler, and the Ossetian response is linked to the liberation myth of the Great Patriotic War.

After the August 2008 war, communications between the capitals ceased and Tbilisi lost the ethnic Georgian Akhlagori region that it had formerly controlled (ICG 2010, 1). Simultaneously, Russia’s recognition of South Ossetian statehood and its growing presence in the region confirmed the shift away from Georgia. Symbolically, on the first anniversary of the recognition of South Ossetia by Russia, in August 2009, a new 163-kilometer natural gas pipeline between South Ossetia and Russia was unveiled, confirming the transfer of dependence to Moscow (German 2016, 161).

Waiting for Annexation: Nation-Building in Limbo

Contrary to the ambiguities encountered in Nagorno-Karabakh, it is clear that full independence is not South Ossetia’s objective. Its authorities have called for a merger with the Russian Federation

and the reunification with Ossetians in the Republic of North Ossetia, officially of North Ossetia – Alania, from whom they were separated in 1918. The idea of uniting the trans-Caucasian Alania (the two Ossetias) emerged at the end of the 1980s (German 2016, 157). After the August 2008 war, Kokoity famously stated: “Now we are an independent state, but we look forward to uniting with North Ossetia and joining the Russian Federation” (quoted in Toal and O’Loughlin 2013b, 148). There has been no separate nation-building effort and all the national symbols, such as the South Ossetian flag, reproduce symbols from North Ossetia. In a 2017 referendum, a new name has been approved for the “republic:” South Ossetia – Alania. The Ossetian nation is one even if temporarily separated into two political entities (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 503; Hoch 2020).

While South Ossetia awaits formal annexation by Moscow, the ground is being prepared: some 95 percent of South Ossetians have Russian citizenship (Nagashima 2019); Russian is one of the region’s official languages; the Russian ruble is the adopted currency; and the educational system is mainly in Russian and follows the Russian school curriculum (ICG 2010, 6). South Ossetian legislation is in fact a carbon copy of Russian law with “South Ossetia” substituted for “Russia” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 506). Political life is closely intertwined with Russia as most of South Ossetia’s ruling elite has come from Russia (ICG 2010, 9–10). Economic dependence on Russia was further solidified after the 2008 war (Ambrosio and Lange 2016). South Ossetia receives billions of rubles from Moscow and exports little while importing everything from Russia (German 2016, 161). Crossing the administrative border between South Ossetia and Georgia is treated as a violation of Article 322 of the Russian Criminal Code on the illegal crossing of Russia’s state borders (ICG 2010, 12).

Conclusion

Peoples’ support for the separatist cause depends on how they perceive their security and welfare as well as on their shared identity and sense of unity and difference. When studying *de facto* states’ adaptations, dynamics, and survival, we should pay attention not only to both these aspects of internal legitimacy (output and identity) but also to the processes that occur both from above and from below, that is, to political strategies of legitimation and to the ways the targeted people respond to them. This article does only part of the job by looking into from-above-identity-legitimation strategies. Although all four Eurasian *de facto* states pursue a set of identity politics that would legitimize the separatist cause, comparing them reveals important differences in boundary-making mechanisms. While maintaining the image of the enemy parent-state and of an imminent external threat is a common endeavor, their collective identity building diverges. Differences may be explained by past and present institutional and demographic structures, by power relations, as well as by collective memories of enemies and friends. Soviet autonomies were accorded to all the nationalities we considered, except for Transnistrians whose identity category did not exist prior to the 1990s. In the latter case, independence for the “Transnistrian people” had to still be justified by constructing a supra-ethnic category encompassing the three constitutive ethnic groups: Russians, Ukrainians, and “true” Moldovans. Among the other three *de facto* states, only Abkhazia is heterogeneous and has to deal with its internal enemy, Georgians/Mingrelians. While Transnistrians deal with heterogeneity by fusion, Abkhazia claims the status of a titular nation for ethnic Abkhazs but creates minority categories for others. Both *de facto* elites squeeze out enemy Bessarabian/Romanian identity attributes of Moldovans and enemy Georgian attributes of Mingrelians. Unlike Abkhazia, both Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia have ethnically homogeneous populations and a neighboring kin, Armenia and North Ossetia, respectively. Differences in their socio-economic capacity and degree of institutionalization may explain South Ossetia’s goal to unite with its kin in the Russian Federation, while a more ambiguous claim was found in Nagorno-Karabakh, where, at least prior to the 2020 war, efforts were sometimes undertaken to develop a distinctive Karabakhi Armenian identity.

Overall, boundary-making mechanisms in de facto states, mostly through historical myth formation, do not differ much from other post-Soviet cases. Compared to internationally recognized states though, legitimating the separatist cause in de facto states requires special emphasis be placed on the imminent threat coming from the “enemy parent-state.” In the context of international isolation and vulnerability, achieving output legitimacy is a continuous challenge and maintaining a perception of threat is of use to justify separation. Whereas Abkhazia and South Ossetia experienced intense conflict with Tbilisi in 2004–2008, and Nagorno-Karabakh with Baku in 2016, 2018, and in 2020 in particular, the Transnistrian de facto border with Moldova has been relatively peaceful for almost three decades. The image of an “imminent threat” coming from Chisinau is less obvious, and people cross the administrative border regularly. Transnistrian elites have to invoke the violence of the early 1990s and work on the construction of “we-ness.”

Nearly 30 years of nation-building in the four enduring Eurasian de facto states provide guidance for studying processes at work in other such entities. The two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk, engage in similar processes, at least before the 2022 war. Akin to the case of Transnistria, Donbas had no autonomous structures in the USSR, and the ongoing conflict that started in 2014 in the context of Euromaidan is not immanently ethnic (Oleksy and Studenna-Skruckwa 2019; Marandici and Leşanu 2020). In eastern Ukraine, including Donbas – and before war-related massive displacement of people –, 85.5 percent of the population is ethnically Ukrainian (11.7 percent is ethnically Russian), with 43 percent of the respondents identifying as Russian-only speakers (Lennon and Adams 2019, 664). Similarly to Transnistria, local political and industrial actors played a crucial role in the conflict outbreak (Matsuzato 2017; Malyarenko and Wolff 2019). Here, too, a significant role in sustaining and legitimizing the separatist cause was played by cultural policies aimed at consolidating the negative image of the parent, Ukrainian state (Nieczypor 2019; Abibok 2018). The “other” became Kyiv’s authorities and their perceived nationalism (“fascism”) viewed as an existential threat to Russian-speakers living in Donbas (Lennon and Adams 2019, 667).

Apart from the “enemy parent-state” discourse, the strategy was to emphasize the specificity of Donbas and its historically inseparable relationship with Russia. Cultural and educational organizations in the region carried out activities aiming at identifying the inhabitants of Donbas with the *Russkiy Mir*: events dedicated to the popularization of Russian literature and history, as well as the celebration of Russian and Soviet holidays and anniversaries (Nieczypor 2019). Soviet-era symbols, monuments, and place names (the October Revolution, the Great Patriotic War) continue to occupy public spaces. Moreover, “Reformatting the memorial space of cities and villages [was] carried out in order to complement the space formed in Soviet times with the system of new symbols, which [would] determine the new policy of memory of the so-called ‘Donetsk’ and ‘Lugansk’ peoples” (Slyvka, Slyvka, and Atamaniuk 2017, 319). These included new monuments to Lenin and to Stalin, monuments to Soviet Army soldiers, as well as memorials to deceased separatists or to the Children of Donbas – symbolizing military threats to civilian population. At the same time, the de facto authorities “cleared” the public spaces from monuments to the victims of the 1930s famine and of the Soviet political repressions (Slyvka, Slyvka and Atamaniuk 2017, 319–321).

Over time and in reaction to changing surroundings, different boundary-making policies are put into place – and are contested. Between 2014 and 2022, depending on the narrative adapted by the Kremlin, separatist leaders in Donbas have been declaring their support for the idea of creating two independent states or a state under the name of Novorossiia or joining the Russian Federation (Nieczypor 2019). That fact alone invites us to revisit the notion of “frozen conflicts” and instead consider them as dynamic phenomena. Indeed, the Russian invasion on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, may well disrupt the whole Eurasian de facto states’ universe and the corresponding field of study.

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- 1 Former PMR President Smirnov's website, not available anymore: http://president.pmr-gov.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1761&Itemid=128. (Accessed December 20, 2013.)

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