



Unrecognized states as a means of coercive diplomacy? Assessing the role of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus

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ABSTRACT

The scholarship on unrecognized or de facto states has been booming in the recent decades exploring this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives. Yet, as this article illustrates, a crucial accent on the instrumentalization of unrecognized states by regional actors – or, to put it differently, on unrecognized states as a source of coercive diplomacy – has been neglected. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering an empirical analysis of Russia's instrumentalization of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as unrecognized states as a means of putting effective pressure on the Government in Tbilisi – usually with respect to issues unrelated to the unrecognized states themselves. More specifically, this article shows that Moscow has used three instruments (*military deployment, passportization* of residents of the unrecognized states and *responsibility to protect*).

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Unrecognized states, those 'anomalous features of the international system and international society' (Harvey and Stansfield 2011), have become a hallmark of the post-bipolar world. Amongst Soviet Union successor states alone, four unrecognized political entities emerged in the aftermath of separatist armed conflicts in the early 1990s that have managed to last until today: South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and Transnistria.¹ These four entities established – from today's perspective – de facto states, of which South Ossetia and Abkhazia have attained partial international recognition following the South Ossetia War of 2008. These four have recently been complemented by Eastern Ukraine's breakaway Luhansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic, raising the number of unrecognized states in the post-Soviet space by two (Sakwa 2015). A source of deep 'national trauma' and intransigence for many Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Moldovans and lately also Ukrainians, these unrecognized states in Eastern Europe and in the South Caucasus have become perpetual hotspots of trouble for regional politics.

Although the existing literature on unrecognized states expands well beyond the argument that these political entities are mere 'puppets' in the hands of their stronger neighbours or their base states, it is a fact that unrecognized states have been masterfully utilized by the

regional actors that are their benefactors in their quests for regional dominance. In fact, the scholarship on unrecognized states has explored the phenomenon from a variety of perspectives, as we illustrate below. Nevertheless, a crucial accent on the instrumentalization of unrecognized states by regional actors – or, to put it differently, on unrecognized states as a source of coercive diplomacy – has been missing. While there has always been a narrative, produced by base states, that *de facto* entities are used as tools of coercive diplomacy² against them, few efforts were made to analyse the question from a scholarly perspective. The use of *de facto* states as sources of Russia's coercive diplomacy, first highlighted by Cornell and Starr (2009), has thus far not been examined in detail. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering an empirical analysis of Russia's instrumentalization of the unrecognized states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as a means of putting effective pressure on the Government in Tbilisi – usually with respect to issues unrelated to the unrecognized states themselves. This article proceeds as follows. The next section casts light on the concept of *de facto* or unrecognized states. It is followed by a review of the literature about unrecognized states as a phenomenon of international politics. Three empirical sections follow that explore the particular ways in which Moscow has utilized the unrecognized states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to exert pressure on the successive governments of Georgia. This empirical section of the article shows how, to that end, Moscow has used three instruments (*military deployment*, *passportization* and *responsibility to protect*). Concluding remarks follow.

Unrecognized vs. *de facto* states?

The notion of a '*de facto*' state first appeared in the field of political science in the 1980s in response to the 'new sovereignty game', reflecting the process of decolonization in Africa and Asia that saw the emergence of dozens of 'factual' states (Yemelianova 2015). Back then, many newly emerging states possessed the formal attributes of independence, including formal external international recognition, while lacking the basic capabilities to police their own territories. These states were termed 'quasi-states', a term coined by Robert Jackson as early as in 1990 (Jackson 1990). According to Jackson, quasi-states, typically found on the African continent, were products of decolonization, and therefore lacked the 'natural' and protracted process of evolutionary state-building. A second group of states, those marked by the capacity to govern themselves even while lacking formal international recognition, were branded 'secessionist', '*de facto*' or 'unrecognised states' (Aliyev 2017). However, it was not until Pegg's (1998) international law-focused study of unrecognized states – in fact, the first book-long monograph ever to have been published on the matter – that the term '*de facto* state' emerged in the late 1990s. Two decades later, there still seems to be no consensus in the literature with regard to terminological distinctions between '*de facto*' and 'quasi' states (Harvey and Stansfield 2011). Various qualifiers or adjectives have been used to designate and delineate these political entities: quasi-, unrecognized, para-, pseudo-, shadow-, phantom-, self-proclaimed, -in waiting.

For instance, Kolossov and O'Loughlin (1999) have used the term '*pseudo-state*', which they define as 'islands of "transitional" or "incomplete" statehood'. The authors also offer a different definition of 'quasi-states', which they – unlike Jackson – regard as a certain form of criminal entity, a sort of 'parallel universe', run, in some instances, by drug barons, as may appear in urban ghettos as well. In contrast to quasi-states, pseudo-states are institutionalized entities with more or less established governments, significant control over

their territory and the attributes of states except for formal recognition (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin 1999).

For Kolstø (2006) 'quasi-states' are entities that 'appear to be juridical more than empirical entities'. In Kolstø's (2006) understanding, quasi-states possess juridical sovereignty, but such weak states are not in a position to provide for their populations and are ineffective in terms of their institutions and authoritative domestic power. Inquiring into the different empirical context of the post-bipolar world, Kolstø (2006) refers to quasi-states as lacking external sovereignty, while he does not question their ability to police their own territory or provide for their populations. At the same time, in an attempt to eliminate this terminological jungle, Kolstø points to the Jacksonian concept of quasi-states as matching the recently coined concept of 'failed states', while 'the term quasi-states is reserved for unrecognised states only' (Kolstø 2006). In contrast to terminological debates on 'quasi-states', literature on *de facto* states provides a more concise definitional base. According to Pegg (1998), who suggested one of the definitions of *de facto* states:

[t]he *de facto* state is a secessionist entity that receives popular support and has achieved sufficient capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a defined territorial area, over which it maintains effective control for an extended period of time.

Pegg suggested six key criteria that a *de facto* state should fulfil. First, *de facto* states are marked by an 'organised political leadership which has risen to power through some degree of indigenous capability' (Pegg 1998). The notion of 'organised political leadership' implies a condition that is weaker than an established government, as Pegg admits, pointing to the two out of four case studies from which he draws: Tamil Elam and Somaliland, in addition to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Eritrea, which have come to possess standard governments. While he emphasizes that *de facto* states are a product of the local population and enjoy its support, this definition would exclude puppet states.³ Pegg stresses the organized political leadership's basic ability to police its territory and provide government services to the local population, which are duties embedded in the crucial Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States 1933. Pegg's fourth-key criterion is the capability of states to enter into relations with other states, as mentioned in the Montevideo Convention. He treats that criterion rather lightly; since he believes that *de facto* states perceive that they have this capability, even though their perception is not shared by the international community. Pegg (1998) introduces a temporal threshold of existence for two years in order for political entities to be regarded as *de facto* states, along with a criterion of widespread international recognition, which *de facto* states usually lack.

A more recent work by Caspersen and Stansfield (2011) proposes three fundamental criteria of *de facto* statehood: (a) *de facto* independence, including territorial control, for a period of at least two years⁴; (b) *de facto* states do not enjoy full international recognition. Although some of them may enjoy partial recognition, they are not regarded as members of the international system of sovereign states; (c) *de facto* states show an aspiration for full, *de jure*, independence, either by means of a formal declaration of independence, the holding of a national referendum on independence, or other means that explicitly illustrate the secessionist entity's desire for separate statehood.

Following Caspersen and Stansfield (2011), we define unrecognized states as 'states that exercise *de facto* independence, engage in institution-building, make a claim to formal independence, or signal separate statehood, receive minimal formal recognition from other sovereign states and exist for at least two years.' According to the extant scholarship, our

empirical cases – the political entities established in the early 1990s in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – both fall into the category of unrecognized, de facto states.

Unrecognized states as subjects of international politics

Over the last decade, scholars have become increasingly interested in the phenomenon of unrecognized states. While case-study literature continues to dominate the field, recent years have seen an increasing body of scholarship aimed at producing general inferences that will hold across cases (Pegg 1998; Kolstø 2006; Geldenhuys 2009; Caspersen and Stansfield 2011). Nevertheless, the literature on unrecognized states, despite its extent, remains weakly organized and largely case study-based. Adding to the contextual richness of unrecognized states in various parts of the world, drawing universally applicable inferences, and identifying patterns or commonalities across cases remain challenging tasks. This partially explains why the extant empirical scholarship on unrecognized states is rarely centred on particular research questions, but rather revolves around the central themes of emergence and state-building, recognition and (partial) integration into the international community (Frear 2014), persisting statehood, (limited) sovereignty and democratization (Protsyk 2009) and so on. Even in a groundbreaking monograph by Caspersen (2009) that has come to shape the field in recent years, the author tends to point to particular context-specific circumstances while failing to establish, *inter alia*, a general theory applicable to state-building in unrecognized states.

For example, the bulk of theoretical works on de facto states has sought to explain the durability of unrecognized states. These studies focused on the elites' economic benefits (King 2001; Caspersen 2013), the separatists' capacity to safeguard their territorial gains (Kolstø 2006) or the separatists' reliance on a potent external benefactor (Caspersen 2009). Other authors have pointed to the importance of internal legitimacy to the unrecognized states. Hence, despite lacking external international or juridical legitimacy, these states preserve their independence because of the support they enjoy from their residents (Lynch 2002; Kolstø 2006), which is often predetermined by the residents' ethnicity (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2014). Thus, these entities do at least possess a legitimacy that is completely internal, as opposed to the legitimacy of recognized states, which is external as well.

Notwithstanding the impressive body of research, no study has thus far sought to address the use of unrecognized states as means of coercive diplomacy by regional actors. This article builds on and develops a path of research that assumes that de facto states are reliant on potent benefactors, which tend to safeguard their existence. Given the substantial asymmetry between most unrecognized states, on the one hand, and the base states against whom they rebel, on the other, the durability of unrecognized states appears to be heavily conditioned by the external benefactors' support. For instance, the population of Abkhazia is less than 240,705, compared to Georgia with its 4.5 million inhabitants, while South Ossetia has a population of less than 55,000. In the absence of external support on which the breakaway regions can rely, Tbilisi would face no significant impediments to any effort to regain control over what it considers its own territories. Without Russia's backing, Georgia would seek to restore its control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As the South Ossetia War of 2008 demonstrated, it was only Moscow's determination to defend its client de facto states in the region that prevented Tbilisi from seeing them, as the South Ossetian militia played rather minor role in the hostilities.

However, it would be erroneous to infer that unrecognized states are mere puppets of their patron states. A characteristic case is the Abkhaz elite, who have repeatedly demonstrated their commitment to preserving their *de facto* state's independence from Russia as well as Georgia, showing defiance to Moscow's efforts to orchestrate events in this critical Black Sea area (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2011; Gerrits and Bader 2016). We acknowledge that base state's policies towards the *de facto* entities enable and encourage Russia to transform them into tools of coercive diplomacy. In both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian policies towards these *de facto* states have been perceived popular (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2011), enabling Russia to exploit these entities (Oskanian 2013; Aliyev 2015a). However, this study moves on from the perspective of relations between unrecognized states and their benefactors to the level of regional politics, showing – by means of case studies of Moscow's attitudes towards Tbilisi – how unrecognized states are used as instruments of Moscow's coercive diplomacy. Since the empirical discussion is centred on *de facto* states of Georgia, we specifically focus on the Russia's outlook in the South Caucasus region. With the above in mind, we seek to avoid a blanket generalization that Russia has the same policy and approach to all *de facto* states in the post-Soviet region.

Russia and the South Caucasus's unrecognized states

The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered the rise of a new political paradigm in the South Caucasus. In turn, ethnic conflicts and the emergence of *de facto* states determined the foreign policies and strategic objectives of regional actors and global powers as they dealt with the post-Soviet space (Souleimanov 2013). The post-cold war order created a new paradigm where former geopolitical rivals found themselves engaged in cooperation and partnership, rather than competition (King 2001). The situation however did yield relevant scope for a re-emerging Russia to create certain instruments and mechanisms to exert political and economic influence upon its neighbourhood (Sakwa 2015).

In this context, Russia has continuously sought to position itself as the sole successor to the Soviet Union's geopolitical heritage. This assumption actually predetermined Moscow's political assertiveness and its consistently defiant posture in its efforts to radically reverse the post-cold war order. The fundamental shift in Russia's foreign policy, which started gradually in the mid-2000s, became more evident during the 2008 Russian–Georgian war and was fully unveiled by the seizure of Crimea in 2014. However, the phenomenon termed in the scholarly literature as 'Russian revisionism', has been more variable and more nuanced than this commonplace conclusion suggests. Since Russia remains opposed to formal revision of borders outside of the post-Soviet space, Russian revisionism has to be understood as targeted and selective (Sakwa 2012; Deyermund 2016). Proactive involvement in so-called peacekeeping and mediating initiatives aimed at territorial disputes and ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space has always been, and still remains, a priority of the Russian Federation (Chausovsky 2016). Dependency of unrecognized states on Kremlin has often been considered in Moscow as a core precondition for Russia's long-term influence on its post-Soviet neighbours afflicted by ethnic and territorial conflicts (Van Herpen 2015).

Russia's *realpolitik* approach towards the *de facto* states in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh stands in stark contrast to the policies of the other key actors from the Western Hemisphere (Sakwa 2012). Realizing its critical role in the settlement of regional conflicts, Moscow, as part of its strategy, has embarked on instrumentalizing the

phenomenon of unrecognized states in an effort to bolster its influence over its regional neighbours (Heritage Foundation 2016). In Eastern Europe, Moscow maintains peacekeeping troops in Transnistria, standing behind the state institution-building of the breakaway region, while being vocal against Moldova's Euro-Atlantic integration. Similarly, Russia recognized the de facto states in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, while at the same time continuing the incorporation and military-political absorption of their territories. It deliberately sought to hinder Georgia's potential eligibility for and compatibility with NATO and the European Union (Aliyev 2016). While functioning as one of the three mediators in the Minsk Group within the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow continues supplying weapons to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. As a result, the uncertainty on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue provides Russia's policy-makers with a strategy for dealing with both Baku and Yerevan.

In order to retain the South Caucasus in its orbit, Moscow considered it both affordable and reasonable to utilize the de facto states in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh as instruments in order to regulate and limit the dynamic of integration by Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan into Western institutions (Yemelianova 2015; Deyermond 2016). To that end, Russia elaborated and imposed a range of instruments and mechanisms, which facilitated the use of the unrecognized states as means of coercive diplomacy vis-à-vis Tbilisi, Baku and Yerevan (Breedlove 2016). In consequence, Russia's geopolitical ambitions to some extent continue to determine the destiny of the de facto states.

To understand the full spectrum of Russia's policies vis-à-vis unrecognized states, it is essential to define and examine the key instruments and mechanisms employed by Moscow in its dealings with de facto states in the South Caucasus. Thus, the key goal of this study is to unveil Russia's modus operandi in dealing with Georgia, whereby it uses the de facto states as instruments of intimidation and as coercive policy tools. We identify *military deployments*, *passportization* and the *responsibility to protect* as the key instruments of Russia's manipulation of the South Caucasus's de facto states.

Military deployments

The deployment of military boots on the ground is the vital component of the instruments used in the de facto states that are aimed at serving Russia's regional interests. This particular instrument exists in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia and was imposed after the ceasefires there began. In a similar vein, Moscow confirmed its willingness and readiness to establish a military presence in the unrecognized state in Nagorno-Karabakh (Zurcher 2007). This has in turn provided an opportunity for Russia to get involved and to design such an initiative (Sirkov and Baikova 2016).

A retrospective glance at the Kremlin's efforts to establish a military presence on the ground in Abkhazia and South Ossetia helps to shed light on Moscow's utilization of the breakaway unrecognized political entities to put pressure on Georgia. Having been more or less involved in the South Ossetian and Abkhazia conflicts in 1991–93, Moscow implicitly backed Shevardnadze in 1993 in his struggle for power against Zviad Gamsakhurdia. In return, it acquired the right to play a proactive role in the mediation between the fighting parties (Saakashvili 2013). In accord with Security Council Resolution 858, the UN established an Observer Mission in Georgia in August 1993. This mission, UNOMIG, aimed at

ensuring compliance with the ceasefire agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia reached on 27 July 1993 (UNSC Res. 858 1993).

However, the ceasefire was violated when the fighting escalated in September 1993. This escalation of the conflict led the UN to officially approve Russia's mediation and the deployment of peacekeeping military units of the Russian-backed Commonwealth of Independent States, at the official request and the consent of the warring sides (UNSC Res. 957 1994). In the short term, Moscow negotiated a ceasefire and a separation of forces agreement, thereby gaining broad scope for political manoeuvring and further influence. This in turn ultimately led to the gradual deterioration of Russia's relationship with Georgia. Interestingly, during the adoption of another Security Council resolution in 1994, Russia's involvement in the peace process was acknowledged to have been constructive. It was particularly stressed that the Russian Federation was facilitating the achievement of a 'comprehensive political settlement of the conflict, including on the political status of Abkhazia, respecting fully the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Georgia' (UNSC Res. 957 1994).

Almost the same process had taken place with South Ossetia two years earlier, with one exception: the Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) was made up of three battalions under Russian command, composed of Russians, Georgians and North Ossetians. This peacekeeping body was agreed to during the negotiations in Sochi in 1992 between Georgia and the South Ossetian forces, under the auspices of Moscow, wherein the Russian side achieved a considerable and, in fact, a decisive role in the further negotiation processes (Sammut and Cvetkovski 1996).

Needless to say, these steps provided a suitable rationale for Russia's regular interference in the internal affairs of the conflicting sides. The assurance of the status quo in both the Abkhazian and South Ossetian hotspots by the stationing of military contingents made Russia indispensable to Georgia, and therefore made Georgia dependent on Moscow for several reasons.

In addition to the presence of Russian troops that acted as peacekeepers, Moscow dispatched its Railroad Troops to Abkhazia in late 2007, with the aim of restoring the local infrastructure. Its political plan in the mid-term perspective was to de-blockade railway access to Georgia in order to restore direct communication with Armenia (Kobaladze 2008). This move sparked condemnation from Tbilisi, because Moscow deliberately avoided seeking the approval of Georgia to undertake this initiative. Incidentally, Russian railroad troops facilitated in advance Russia's military incursion in August 2008. This military contingent, posing as peacekeepers, primarily safeguarded Moscow's crucial role in the resolution of Georgia's territorial problems, cementing Russia's ability to interfere with Georgia's agenda for Abkhazia.

It is noteworthy that until the suspension of Russia's peacekeeping mandate in the aftermath of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, the Russian troops in the de facto states were officially responsible for the safety of their populations. This factor made the local populations dependent on Russia for their security (Ivannikov 2012). Furthermore, the strategic mission of the military deployments was provide the momentum for rapid military action aimed at changing the strategic environment by *fait accompli*, as has recently happened again in Crimea. Nevertheless, the instrument that was the Russian military presence on the ground acted first and foremost as a deterrent to any attempt by Georgia to recapture the breakaway territories. The biased attitudes of Russian peacekeepers surfaced in late May 2008 when Moscow wittingly facilitated local military operations initiated by

the South Ossetian authorities aimed at taking over the Georgian enclaves on Ossetian territory (Socor 2008). Located to the north and north-east of Tskhinvali, the capital of the de facto state of South Ossetia, the Georgian villages of Tamarasheni, Eredvi, Kehkvi and Achabedi were attacked by the Ossetian militia literally two weeks prior to the Georgian large-scale offensive in August 2008. While the South Ossetians sought to neutralize the Georgian enclaves, the Russian peacekeeping contingent did nothing to prevent or to terminate the spreading hostilities (IFFMCG 2009b, vol. 3). Later on, it was accepted that the ambivalent stance taken by the Russian peacekeepers had the intention of provoking Georgia to take countermeasures.

As has been revealed by Moscow-based security and defence expert Pavel Felgenhauer, Russia had already planned in early June to trigger the skirmishes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to get Georgia involved in a large-scale conflict, initially containing Georgian countermeasures using its peacekeepers (Felgenhauer 2008a). He also asserted that the Russian military intervention into Georgia itself was pre-planned. Meanwhile, the headquarters of the Russian peacekeeping contingent urged Georgia not to retaliate, vowing to become a physical barrier between the belligerents if necessary. Simultaneously, the Russian command relocated its peacekeeping troops, stationing them along the line of contact between Tskhinvali and Georgia – thereby reinforcing the rear of the Ossetian militia, which in turn managed to gain control over the Georgian enclaves (Felgenhauer 2008b).

Later, in the evening of 4 August, a heavy mortar shelling of Georgian villages provoked Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to order a major assault on Tskhinvali. Hence, the de facto state's troops had been used as a 'trap' to entangle Georgia in the conflict, clearly exposing the Russian peacekeeping mission to danger as an instrument for pushing Georgia off the NATO membership track. The de facto states in South Ossetia and Abkhazia were the operational environments where the 'military deployment' instrument was utilized as a means of political coercion in regard to Tbilisi (Breedlove 2016).

To sum up, the Russian military deployment in Abkhazia and South Ossetia become an important component in the instrumentalization of the de facto states in these breakaway regions of Georgia. This tool was used in an attempt to keep Georgia vulnerable in its relations with Moscow and to dismantle Georgia's reformed army (Aliyev 2014), in order to make NATO membership impossible and undermine the stability of the Georgian state.

Passportization

Passportization – the issuance of Russian passports to residents of the unrecognized states who want them – is the second important instrument that Moscow uses to ramp up its influence over the de facto states, laying solid ground for military intervention and direct involvement in the conflict over the recognized states. Passportization in a breakaway region by a third country dramatically violates the traditional state's territorial sovereignty. Georgia is a case in point (Artman 2013; Gerrits and Bader 2016).

In this regard, one of Vladimir Putin's remarks about the consequences of the demise of the Soviet Union yields some useful context, indicating the core motivation for Russia's progressively more assertive posture in the unrecognized states. Speaking of the dissolution of the Soviet Empire as the 'geopolitical catastrophe of the century', he stated: 'as for the Russian people, it was a genuine tragedy. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and countrymen found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory' (Putin 2015).

Putin set forth a concept according to which residents of the countries neighbouring Russia, which share the Soviet heritage, would henceforth be treated as 'fellow citizens and countrymen', spurred by the idea of re-establishing Russia's political, economic and cultural superiority. This particular approach was the ideological basis for passportization as it was imposed on the unrecognized states in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, shortly after the separatist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were established in 1992 and 1993, respectively.

The acknowledged constituent components of Putin's underlying strategy, which yields wide scope for the instrumentalization of the unrecognized states, are the so-called policy of passportization that has been imposed since 2002–03 and the Russian boots on the ground that facilitate the regions' military–political absorption, which we discussed in the chapter above (IIFFMCG 2009a, vol. 1). These two main components turned the de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into client entities, re-designed as instruments in Russia's coercive policy towards Georgia. While the political reasons for Russia's deployments of military troops posing as peacekeepers are more or less comprehensible, there is another instrument – passportization – that is less well known but that has considerably reinforced the process of instrumentalizing the de facto states.

Passportization means the mass conferral of Russian citizenship, and consequently passports, to persons living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In that way the security of the vast majority of these Russian citizens, who do not live within the constitutional territory of the Russian Federation, is assured by the Russian military that is deployed in that specific territory. These two components make up part of Russia's so-called *modus operandi vis-à-vis* the de facto republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which are breakaway states from Georgia. The phenomenon of passportization has resulted in the massive distribution of Russian Federation passports to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the period 2002–2008, without Georgia's permission.⁵

The use of passportization by Russia in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia has become widely accepted by local population also due to practical reasons. Many in these unrecognized republics only had Soviet passports, which were no longer valid. They did not have Georgian passports, as they did not recognize Georgian sovereignty, thus were unable to travel. From Georgia's perspective, the residents of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are Georgian citizens, even though they do not hold official documentation of that fact. The authorities in Tbilisi have a reasonable belief that the policy of passportization is not only integral to Russia's attempt to coerce Georgia into abandoning its westward economic and political orientation, but that it also provides solid ground for a future Russian claim to sovereignty over these territories. Consequently, the passportization of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, their subsequent diplomatic recognition by Russia and a few other states and the decision by Russia's policy-makers to considerably reinforce their military assets on the ground have all been viewed as unlawful developments by Tbilisi.

Since 2003, Russia has utilized its policy of passportization as a tool to apply pressure on Georgia. It is worth mentioning that, at an earlier point in time, seeking to justify Vladimir Putin's preferred solution to the problem legally and in terms of international law, the Duma, Russia's legislative body, officially approved a new federal law on citizenship (Federal Law no. 18 cl. 2500). The law came into effect in 2002 and provided Russian citizenship through a simplified procedure to all those who had been, or whose ancestors had been, citizens of the Soviet Union. This notable amendment to Russia's citizenship law was soon exploited by tens of thousands of new applicants from South Ossetia and Abkhazia (IIFFMCG 2009a, vol. 1).

As already noted, the tensions between Georgia on the one hand and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other opened an avenue for Russia's instrumental use of the de facto states in Georgia's breakaway regions, with the aim of disrupting Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path. Unrecognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia were turned into convenient tools in Russia's strategy of coercive diplomacy by passportization and the consistent Russian military build-up, combined with economic and security dependence on Moscow.

In 2004 it became clear that the Russian-brokered peace talks between Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia lacked any real prospect for success, and they came to a dead end. Additionally, Russia increasingly indicated concern about and discontent with Georgia's Western path, which caused a deep crisis in bilateral relations and transformed Russia from a broker/mediator in the process of conflict resolution to a direct party to the conflict. The central complaint from Moscow was Georgia's strong desire to join NATO, which in 2004–2006 became the critical point of contention in the Russia–Georgia relationship (German 2008, 2015).

In short, the existence of Russian citizens on the ground provided an opportunity for Russia to increase its direct control over the de facto states, making them in effect a part of Russia, which radically changed the logic of the conflict after the clashes in 2004. This has been an important instrument in Russia's coercive policy vis-à-vis the recognized states, as passportization has paved way for Russia to 'blackmail' Georgia if Tbilisi does not abandon the path of Euro-Atlantic Integration. This made the targeted states (Georgia, Moldova) politically insecure and much more susceptible to Moscow's regional ambitions. The passportization factor was efficiently used by Moscow on the eve of the South Ossetian war, providing it with a pretext of defending its own citizens and enabling it to intervene in Georgia via the Responsibility to Protect concept advanced and accepted by the United Nations.

Responsibility to protect

Given the extensive number of Russian citizens that by 2008 lived in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, policy-makers in Moscow started to push for Russia's sovereign right to engage directly in the conflict it was itself provoking, and which it believed was escalating. By doing so, Moscow counted on being able to exploit its passportization instrument as an important issue enabling it to utilize the United Nations-approved concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P).⁶ As a background condition to justify its military incursion into the de facto states and then into Georgia, Moscow alleged that the Russian peacekeepers' role had been disrupted by the Georgian offensive, which constituted an existential threat to Russian citizens on the ground. In particular, Moscow's commitment to 'protect Russia's citizens', wherever they might live, was a core justification for the intervention in Georgia, which has been referred to as 'Russia's 9/11' (Allison 2008).

The situation served as a convenient pretext for a military build-up, spurring the elaboration of a structural framework for the instrumental use of the de facto states by Russia. Russian officials' announcements and expressions of viewpoint frequently had an obvious pro-Ossetian and pro-Abkhazian character, provoking Georgia to consider a military solution to its territorial problems as inevitable. Against this backdrop, the passportization process in Abkhazia and South Ossetia opened an avenue for Moscow's policy-makers to manipulate Georgia. It therefore came as no surprise that the more Georgia asserted its sovereign right to develop a closer relationship with NATO, the more often various officials

in Moscow expressed 'Russia's commitment to protect its citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia' (Van Herpen 2015).

Therefore, the international norm of Responsibility to Protect, in connection with Russia's regional interests, emerged as an active mechanism for instrumentalizing the passportization of the populations in the de facto states in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A statement by Vitaliy Churkin, Russia's UN representative, in which he explained the validity of Russia's military invasion of Georgia's internationally recognized territory, fairly supports our argument. Specifically, he stressed that the 'Georgian military during the two days of operations committed war crimes and sought to initiate ethnic cleansing' (United Nations 2008). These two allegations paved the way for legitimizing the application of the R2P norm. Churkin unambiguously stressed that Russia was bent on defending its compatriots in South Ossetia in accordance with international law. Having created a strong basis for action via passportization, Russian armed forces invaded South Ossetia, expressly aiming to protect citizens of the Russian Federation from the Georgian offensive. As a consequence of the five-day conflict, Russian President Medvedev underscored that 'historically, Russia remains a security guarantor for Caucasus nations', morally fortifying the decision to intervene (Regnum 2008).

Moscow's use of the passportization instrument to justify applying the R2P mechanism to intimidate and intervene in Georgia was entirely successful (Aliyev 2015b; Allison 2008). Although the key Western countries expressed immediate concern, and France raced to act as a mediator between Moscow and Tbilisi, neither NATO nor the European Union were willing to offer a firm and robust deterrent to Russia's defiant actions. Using passportization to establish tangible, influential instruments, Russian policy-makers adeptly instrumentalized the de facto states by exploiting a mechanism of international law.

Conclusion

Using a case study of Russia's policy towards the unrecognized states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, this article seeks to illustrate that unrecognized states can be important tools in the agenda of dominant actors to influence regional politics in general and the policies of nations affected by separatism in particular. An empirical analysis of Russia's agenda in the South Caucasus since the early 2000s enabled the authors to identify three distinct *instruments* in Russia's regional agenda. The instruments of maintaining a military presence and granting Russian citizenship to the population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia enabled Moscow to strengthen its grip over the unrecognized republics prior to Russia's formal acknowledgement of the republics' independence in 2008. The mechanisms of *military deployments* and *passportization* enabled Moscow to legitimize its presence in Georgia's breakaway republics, paving the way for the use of the principle of *responsibility to protect*, as proved useful in the South Ossetia War of August 2008.

The existence of unrecognized or de facto states in the South Caucasus has allowed Moscow to maintain its influence in the region – and take an increasingly assertive stance towards Georgia. This explains Moscow's interest in blocking a lasting solution to the regional 'frozen conflicts' while keeping the unrecognized states alive economically and politically. Although the findings of this article are predominantly empirical and context-bound, they can have general relevance in pointing to the use of the phenomenon of unrecognized states as a tool for exercising power politics.

Notes

1. A fifth de facto state, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, was re-conquered by the Russian Army in 1999–2000, at the cost of two bloody military campaigns.
2. We define coercive diplomacy as an ‘attempt to get a target, a state, a group (or groups) within a state, or a nonstate actor-to change its objectionable behaviour through either the threat to use force or the actual use of limited force’ (Art and Cronin 2003, 6).
3. Interestingly, this would possibly exclude the Luhansk People’s Republic and the Donetsk People’s Republic, from the list of de facto states, at least for the time being.
4. *De facto* states are in control of most of the territory they claim, including its capital city and key regions, although this does not prevent them from claiming more territory.
5. It is worth mentioning that the passportization has been welcomed by the populations of the unrecognized states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia since it gives them a means to travel internationally as Russian citizens; something they would not have been eligible of otherwise.
6. We understand the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as defined by the United Nations as ‘the principle that first obligates individual states and then the international community to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity’. See <http://www.unric.org/en/responsibility-to-protect?layout=default>.

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