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## POST-SOVIET DE FACTO STATES IN THE THEORY OF SMALL STATES

**Barbara Baarová – Vladimír Baar\***

### ABSTRACT

With their geographic and economic dimensions, post-Soviet de facto states are very small structures, yet they have existed for over a quarter of a century. This means that they have already had a generation that has no connection with the mother state from which they have separated. However, because the patron of their independence is (or, in the case of Artsakh, indirectly) Russia, which even officially recognized two of them (Abkhazia and South Ossetia-Alania), many authors keep observing their development. Their geopolitical importance significantly increased after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Unrecognized states cannot be open economies, even if they wanted. In addition, in the case of post-Soviet de facto states, these are underdeveloped economies with high import costs and whose products are characterized by low competitiveness. The submitted contribution focuses on these structures from the point of view of the theory of small states. Based on geographic, demographic, economic and historical indicators, as well as the ability to resist reintegration, they suggest their theoretical possibilities of defending factual independence and gaining wider international recognition. The theory of small states shows in practice that the benefits of "smallness" cannot be used by de facto states to strengthen their political and economic prestige precisely because of the absence of international recognition and the rivalry of large states over geopolitical influence.

**Key words:** De Facto States, Small States, Ethnic Structure, Depopulation, Armed Forces, Abkhazia, South Ossetia-Alania, Artsakh, Transnistria.

### Introduction

In 2021, a full thirty years passed since the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 15 independent states. Besides these, there were

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also four specific formations in the post-Soviet area, which are, with regard to more than a quarter of a century of existence, called de facto states, or states without international recognition (Transnistria and Artsakh<sup>1</sup>) or with limited recognition (Abkhazia and South Ossetia-Alania<sup>2</sup>). All post-Soviet de facto states are very small based on geographic and economic parameters. However, their de facto existence, which extends beyond generation of people who were born and raised in an internationally unrecognized entity, and therefore have no direct relationship with the former mother state, brings up a question of whether there is at least a theoretical chance of defending their formal independence and gaining wider international recognition. The aim of this study is to show whether, at least on theoretical level, the existing post-Soviet de facto states have a chance to change their status, even though they are very small political units, on which the theory of small states can be applied.

The existence of each de facto state is made possible by a combination of several factors, but in most cases, it is a combination of the internal weakness of the mother state and the external influence of a regional or global power, which follows its own interests in the conflict (Berg & Toomla, 2009, p. 27). Such powers act as patron states in the conflict, which protect separated entities from reintegration with their mother state not only militarily but also support them economically, or help them to engage in the international system, including issuing their own internationally valid documents so that de facto citizens can travel and do business abroad. In the case of the post-Soviet space, it was Russia who became the main patron, which has intervened militarily in favour of Transnistria (King, 2001; Popescu, 2006; Kharitonova, 2014), Abkhazia (Allison, 2009; Nalbandanov, 2009) and South Ossetia (Allison, 2009; Felgenhauer, 2009) and still keeps its troops in their territories (Rukhadze, 2013). In the case of Artsakh, this part was played by Armenia (de Waal, 2012), but its current status is also indirectly affected by Russia (Kopeček, 2017).

Practice has shown that with a support of a strong patron, de facto states can

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of the USSR, the area was called Nagorno-Karabakh and it declared independence under that name. At the same time, however, the alternative Armenian name Artsakh was introduced, which was officially adopted in 2017 after being accepted by an overwhelming majority in the referendum on the new constitution.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in the case of this country, after a referendum in 2017, the name of South Ossetia was supplemented by the name Alania, referring to the medieval Alanian group, who Ossetians consider themselves to be descendants of. In 1994, the name Alania had already been added to its name by North Ossetia, a subject of the Russian Federation.

exist significantly longer than it used to be in the past. Record in this respect is held by North Cyprus, which separated from Cyprus with the support of Turkey as early as 1975 (though it proclaimed independence only in 1983) and is now a stabilized political unit, even though the only state that has recognized it as a subject of international law is its patron (Kliot & Mansfield, 1997). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, no other state survived without international recognition – Rhodesia vanished after 15 years of fights between the ruling white minority and black majority (Brownell, 2011); out of the four de facto independent South African homelands only Transkei survived for 19 years (Jensen & Zenker, 2015), Manchuria disappeared after 15 years with the military defeat of his patron (Dubois, 2010), Tuva was swallowed up by its patron Russia (or Soviet Union) after 24 years of existence (Khuranova, 2009). Mongolia, which had been in a similar position, began to gain formal recognition of its independence from other states after about a quarter of a century of formally independent development (under the patronage of the USSR) and was admitted to the United Nations in 1961 (Baar, Kurfürst & Baarová, 2017). Tibet was facing a different fate as it had no patron at the proclamation of its formal independence in 1913 (similarly as, for example, Biafra a few decades later), but survived until 1950, when it was occupied by the army of Communist China, which declared Tibet's annexation as a reintegration (Shakabpa, 1967). In the case of post-Soviet de facto states, a question arises whether their destiny shall turn out to be that of Tibet (reintegration with the former mother country), or whether they will share the fate of Tuva (annexed by the patron) or Mongolia (internationally recognized independence).

Political and economic changes in the broad Eurasian area have put these countries into the dilemma regarding the further developments – whether to remain in the current illegitimate state and seek to legitimize it or transform its existing economic ties with its patron towards the political sphere and merge with it. Both options seem simple, but the international-political environment as well as geographic conditions limit these possibilities significantly and there is an effort to return the situation to its original state – i.e., reintegration with the mother country. In each of these de facto states there are also different trains of thought regarding their own futures, which sometimes change under the influence of new events. So far, the last such breakthrough event was the unlawful Russian annexation of the Ukrainian Crimea, which strengthened the supporters of integration with Russia greatly (especially in Transnistria and South Ossetia-Alania) and, on the other hand, frightened those who aimed at maintaining the

acquired independence (Abkhazia).

During the 1990s, the expert texts focused mainly on case studies of the roots of separatist conflicts and the ways of solving them. The research of the internal dynamics of unrecognized states began after about 15 years of their existence, especially after the Russo-Georgian war and the international recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia (Caspersen, 2008). Since then, there has been a significant increase in the number of studies dealing with political and social changes within de facto states. Out of the texts that deal with the dynamics of development within de facto states as well as their international status we shall name e.g., von **Steinsdorff**, 2012; **Blakkisrud & Kolstø**, 2012; **Ó Beacháin**, 2012; **Hoch**, 2018; **Kopeček**, 2016; **Pegg & Berg**, 2016, **Toal**, 2013, 2014, 2015 and **O'Loughlin** 2011, 2014, with whom Russian geographer **Kolossov** (2011) has long been cooperating and publishing. This is largely related to the fact that de facto states are no longer taken as merely a passing phenomenon, which appeared for a short time in the context of decolonization and transformation of post-Soviet space, but they are entities that may exist in a state of non-recognition or very limited international recognition for a relatively long period of time (besides the aforementioned entities including Northern Cyprus also Somaliland or the aforementioned inter-war de facto states on the periphery of China). Two decades ago, **Kolossov & O'Loughlin** (1998) asked in their title whether they were not "*harbingers of a new geopolitics*". The second reason for the increased academic interest in the internal dynamics of the processes within de facto states is to improve access to these entities compared to the first years of their actual existence.

## 1. Theory of small states and de facto states

The term "small state" is very difficult to define because it depends on the factors which are used for its definition. We have been encountering small states since ancient times (such as the Sumerian or Greek city states). They existed in densely populated lowland regions (eastern China, northern India) as well as in mountainous regions with a sparse population (the Caucasus region). In Europe, they were typical for German and Italian-speaking regions, where they survived until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the colonial conquest of the world, small states vanished and reappeared, often in other forms, during decolonization. At this time, a number of very small, especially island states, originated, which had never before had statehood (especially in the Caribbean

and Oceania). A vast majority of the smallest states are such postcolonial states, the second group is made up of several European miniature states, which have had centuries of independent statehood development, which they have been able to defend through diplomatic negotiations even in difficult times<sup>3</sup>.

Although decolonization seemed to have ended in the 1980s, after the end of the Cold War, a number of new states, small in both territory and population, were established, which has led to the consideration that *"nowadays, when the processes of internationalization and globalization have become more successful, any step towards creating new states is in an obvious contradiction"* (Had & Kotyk, 1999, p. 9). Nevertheless, the new small states continue to emerge as a product of dissatisfaction with the administration of the existing state within which they are located – a typical example being the separation of Montenegro and Kosovo, as well as Somaliland and Eritrea, and post-Soviet de facto states. The fact that their dissatisfaction and the parental country's lack of power to maintain its territorial integrity is used by a third party is a result of rivalry between states and search for balance in the disrupted political system. It is therefore logical that any separation will sooner or later become an international problem of a macro-regional or even global scale.

The interest in small states culminated in the 1970s, when mass decolonization took place and when, after the wave of emergence of new African states from the previous decade, a number of very small island states from the Oceania, Indian-Ocean and Caribbean regions appeared on the world map. In the bipolar world, their existence and membership in the United Nations could be influenced by a vote in the General Assembly, while respecting the equality of votes, irrespective of the size of the state. The focus of research was, in particular, the degree of sovereignty of such states and the influence of large states on their politics (Keohane, 1969; Reid, 1974; Plischke, 1977; Gunter, 1977; Harden, 1985). The academic interest in small states simmered down with the completion of decolonization in the 1980s, but the emergence of new small states linked to the disintegration of the Soviet empire and the changes in the international system have led to a revival of interest in small states research (Duursma, 1996; Knudsen, 2002; Druláková, 2014). A number of studies have been carried out in which the authors sought to combine quantitative and qualitative indicators and

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<sup>3</sup> These miniature states include the Vatican, a heavily reduced church state, which ceased to exist for 59 years after its annexation by Italy, but has returned onto the political map of the world through a successful diplomacy.

create new categories of small states. For example, **Geser** (2001) distinguishes three types of small state states: the first type is referred to as objectively small because their smallness is defined by their actual size (e.g. Monaco), the second type includes states relatively small in comparison to others (Belgium vs. France or the Czechia and Germany, but also France or Germany when compared to the USA), and the third type includes subjectively small states, i.e. those that consider themselves small, without it being necessarily objectively so.

Barbadian economist **Tom Crowards** (2002) worked out a detailed categorization of states, allocating five categories (microstates, small states, middle states, large states, very large states) using the cluster method. At the same time, he also compared 36 older categorizations since 1957. If we look at the categorization involving the already emerged new states that arose with the disintegration of the communist federations, they will always include the mother states (i.e., Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova), from which the post-Soviet de facto states have separated, classified as small states. Looking at the mother states of other long-standing de facto states (Kosovo, Northern Cyprus and Somaliland) we can see that they are also small states – Serbia, Cyprus and Somalia. The trend is thus obvious – they are mainly small states, which cannot keep some parts of their territory under control. When something similar happened to Russia, it was able, although with difficulties, to force the separated territory (Chechnya) to re-submit to the Russian administration (Lapidus, 1998; Souleimanov, 2007). In the past, the same thing happened to Biafra – the separated state of Igbo people, which was reintegrated into Nigeria after three years of struggle (Nixon, 1972; Okechukwu, Nkwachukwu & Chijioke, 2016)<sup>4</sup>. In these cases, there was a clear absence of a strong patron whose support would help to prevent reintegration. In the case of Northern Cyprus, it was Turkey (Kliot & Mansfield, 1997)<sup>5</sup>, in the case of Kosovo, it was the EU and US patronage (Fierstein, 2008). Similarly, Artsakh would not have succeeded had it been protected only by Armenia – that is why it pragmatically turned to Russia and its project of restoring its sphere of influence, the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia is a typical patron for Abkhazia, South Ossetia-Alania, Transnistria, and for the newly formed Donbass republics in the east of Ukraine. We can also mention the

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<sup>4</sup> Compared to Chechnya, which was not recognized by any UN member state, Biafra was officially recognized by five states: Gabon, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, Zambia and Haiti.

<sup>5</sup> Turkey is also the only state that recognized the independence of North Cyprus; nevertheless, this unit managed to establish at least unofficial contacts through its 18 representative offices, particularly in EU countries (9), Muslim countries (8) and the USA.

de facto state of Somaliland, the creation of which was a result of the state power's breakdown in Somalia, however it was also supported by Ethiopia (Adam 1994) and later received significant economic support from Saudi Arabia (Muhumed, 2016). However, many authors dispute the role of Ethiopia as a patron (Richards, 2016, p. 178; Rudincová, 2017, pp. 198-199), although they also admit that the role of Ethiopia may also lead to international recognition of Somaliland as it is accepting Somaliland passports and has an official representation in the country (Hoch & Rudincová, 2015, p. 46). Somaliland also has representative offices in Britain, USA, Italy, France, Sweden, South Africa and Djibouti.

Even when looking at the map, we can see de facto states as small states. However, states that are commonly referred to as small are difficult to compare with each other. They are mostly defined on the basis of a combination of several objective criteria, which individual authors often understand differently. That is why many authors look for various relative criteria such as involvement in international economic cooperation and international institutions (Had & Kotyk, 1999) or international behaviour (Hey, 2003). Objective or quantitative criteria such as population, area size, or gross domestic product volume can be simply categorized or combined and relativized (e.g., in terms of the percentage of the world population, area, or GDP).

The position on the imaginary axis "small – medium – large" state also depends on the subjective factor, i.e., how the state is perceived and presented by its leaders, citizens, neighbouring states and transnational structures. As has been mentioned, sometimes there is a contradiction between subjective ideas and its real significance and influence in the international environment. We may regard a state small, however in relation to another state, it may represent the position of the large one (Georgia is large in relation to separated Abkhazia, but it is very small compared to Turkey). From this relative comparison, but also from the above-mentioned facts, it is quite obvious that all four post-Soviet de facto states belong to a specific category of very small states (microstates) whose population does not exceed 1 million inhabitants, area 30 thousand km<sup>2</sup> and GDP is less than 10 billion USD (World Bank Data). Such a group includes around 50 states, a quarter of all countries in the world. The de facto states analysed here do not reach half of these figures, not even one country exceeds USD 1 billion (as well as 16 UN member states). When relative GDP per capita is taken into account, de facto states oscillate at a very low level of around USD 2,000/inhabitant. This is comparable with the poorest microstates in Africa

(Comoros, São Tome and Príncipe, Djibouti) and Oceania (Kiribati, Solomon Islands). Most of them, however, are doing economically well, especially if they have been successful in providing travel services (such as Barbados, Seychelles or Palau). Using the abovementioned indicator, advanced European microstates are even on the top three positions in the world, exceeding 100,000 USD/inhabitant (Monaco, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg). This clearly shows that most of the microstates are economically successful and if some of the post-Soviet de facto states ever won an international recognition, they would be among the 20-30 smallest states, which we can call super-microstates (i.e., not only aforementioned states, but also Andorra, San Marino, Grenada, Dominica, Tuvalu, Palau or Nauru). However, it is the very small size of the de facto states which is, out of all indicators, along with the illegitimate circumstances of their emergence, not only a serious obstacle to their recognition but also limits their possibilities for economic self-sufficiency.

The inclusion of the economic dimension to the level of diplomatic instruments is a traditional element in the foreign policies of small states (Firth, 2000; Read, 2001; Hey, 2003; Zemanová, Druláková, Peterková & Přikryl, 2014). Their visibility and seriousness in the international field often depended on their economic openness to other actors from the outside (Lee, 2004). In terms of supplying export markets, securing strategic imports, looking for investment opportunities, foreign investment incentives, liberalization and openness of the internal market as well as providing foreign economic aid. The emphasis on the economic level of foreign policy is virtually the only option for internationally unrecognized states to create favourable positions for negotiating some political support.

It is much more difficult to assess qualitative indicators. In her work (2003), **Jeanne Hey** defines the characteristic behaviour and profile of small states in the international community on the basis of the following points, to which assessment of the four de facto states analysed is assigned:

- low level of participation on world events (*yes, virtually almost zero*);
- limiting activities to the closest geographic area (*yes, in addition, except Transnistria, all are one-sided*);
- supporting a limited range of interests but showing a high level of activity (*yes, but the activity is low due to the absence of international recognition*);

- internationalism, support for transnational structures (*the effort is there, however, their international status limits it*);
- economic integration (*the effort is, but their international status excludes it*);
- use of protection and support by stronger states or bandwagoning (*yes, strongly - moreover, the support and strength of the patron is a guarantee of their existence*);
- emphasis on promotion of the values of international law, norms and moral ideals (*yes, however, for de facto states, there is a problem with the point of view*);
- shift towards diplomatic and economic instruments of foreign policy (*yes, economic diplomacy is an option how to at least partially overcome political isolation*);
- condemnation of the use of force to promote one's interests - overshadowing military instruments of foreign policy (*yes, especially due to fear from reintegration with the mother country by military force*);
- promoting consensual action (*yes, it represents a chance for obtaining the consent of the maternal country*);
- neutrality (*yes, but limited by patronage*).

According to **Drulák** (1997, p. 7), the strategy of small states' behaviour can be developed further:

- limiting activities to a close geographic area is justified by a lack of resources to achieve global goals (*yes, to the full extent for de facto states*);
- small states are primarily involved in international organizations based on the principle of equality of states, which enables them to ensure fair access, increase their international prestige, and, thanks to their global numerical dominance, with the support of other small states it enables them to outvote the large ones (*yes, de facto states would certainly want that, however their unrecognized international status makes it impossible for them to participate*);
- due to the lack of their own resources and limited capacities of the internal market, they are forced to open up their own economy and to engage in international economic relations (*on the contrary, in the case of de facto states it increases their dependency on patrons*);

- small states often seek to promote respect for international law on a global scale (*this is not the case of de facto states, because strict adherence to rules hampers their international recognition*).

Thus, it is clear from the above summary that for de facto states, qualitative indicators are in fact unattainable without a broad international comparison.

Unrecognized states cannot be open economies, even if they wanted. In addition, in the case of post-Soviet de facto states, these are underdeveloped economies with high import costs and whose products are characterized by low competitiveness. Their geographical position might also give a negative impression manifold by the grave problems with their maternal states. Mineral resources and natural conditions in general are not unique – mountain massifs and rivers, as well as healing and mineral springs are found in many places of the entire Caucasus region, and there are virtually no resources in Transnistria and it is neither attractive for tourists. Human resources are also limited – young and middle-aged people are largely leaving for work abroad, especially to Russia, but for many, their dream is developed Europe, America, or Australia. The lack of employment opportunities is accompanied by a lack of capital, and even the low production costs due to cheap labour do not bring a comparative advantage as the absence of international recognition makes export more difficult. The de facto states do not have finances to support it; the possibility of protecting their own market is limited because they depend on the import of a wide range of goods. Even so, imports are limited by solvency due to the limited value of the export assortment, leading to a permanent negative trade balance (Table 1). The problem is the absence of their own currency, and even its introduction in the case of Transnistria and Artsakh<sup>6</sup> (and completely formally in Abkhazia in 2008<sup>7</sup>) did not solve the economic problems.

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<sup>6</sup> The Artsakh dram is more of a collector's rarity (like the Cook Islands dollar, which is in parity with the New Zealand dollar) because it is in parity with Armenian drama – there are only 3 types of coins and 2 banknotes worth 2 and 10 drams in circulation. However, Armenian banknotes are worth 10,000, 20,000 and even 100,000 drams.

<sup>7</sup> The Abkhazian apsar is indeed just a rarity for collectors issued for the 15th anniversary of the victory in the war with Georgia (1992-1993). There were 2000 silver coins valued at 10 apsars and 1000 gold coins worth 25 and 50 apsars struck.

**Tab. 1:** Foreign trade development of de facto states 2012-2019 in mil USD and the ratio between export and import (E:I)

de facto state	2012	E:I	2013	E:I	2014	E:I	2015	E:I
Abkhazia <sup>a</sup>	355.1	1:5.9	450.5	1:5.7	516.1	1:5.8	358.5	1:4.0
S. Ossetia-A. <sup>b</sup>	55.6	1:50.0	55.1	1:20.9	69.9	1:20.8	54.1	1:5.7
Artsakh <sup>c</sup>	349.0	1:5.0	328.5	1:4.5	366.7	1:4.7	314.6	1:1.4
Transnistria <sup>d</sup>	2496.8	1:1.1	2248.1	1:2.8	2350.6	1:2.3	1749.4	1:1.9
de facto state	2016	E:I	2017	E:I	2018	E:I	2019	E:I
Abkhazia <sup>a</sup>	366.0	1:3.5	366.6	1:5.0	343.6	1:3.6	404.2	1:3.4
S. Ossetia-A. <sup>b</sup>	65.6	1:6.3	78.6	1:7.0	65.6	1:5.4	78.8	1:4.1
Artsakh <sup>c</sup>	338.0	1:3.2	444.4	1:1.8	555.1	1:1.7	656.1	1:1.3
Transnistria <sup>d</sup>	1388.2	1:1.6	1616.0	1:1.6	1913.3	1:1.7	1865.1	1:1.8

a. Upravlenie gosudarstvennoy statistiki Respubliki Abkhaziya (<http://ugsra.org/ofitsialnaya-statistika.php>)

b. Vneshnaya torgovlya Rossii (<http://russian-trade.com>)

c. Artsakh Republic National Statistical Service ([www.stat-nkr.am/en](http://www.stat-nkr.am/en))

d. Gosudarstvennaya sluzhba statistiki MPR (<http://mer.gospmr.org/gosudarstvennaya-statistika.html>)

The economies of de facto states can be categorized as being at the level of underdeveloped countries and are so marginal within the world economy (none of them reaches even 0.00001 % of the world GDP) that it is difficult to apply some of the economic theories which solve the problems of underdeveloped economies. According to the theory of national economy of German economist **Friedrich List** (Kalínská, 2010, p. 57), a country should only fully open to foreign competition after its industry matures (i.e., becomes competitive). According to **List**, it is almost impossible for a backward country to build up a domestic industry without the industry being temporarily protected from competition from developed countries. He therefore recommends to backward countries to temporarily protect their domestic industry and enable it to achieve competitiveness on the world market. The problem with this theory is that internationally unrecognized states are not in a position to protect their internal market from competition. Moreover, their miniature economies are able to cover the needs of their own markets with only a small fraction of their production. This is also related to the impossibility of applying the theory of international trade by Indian economist **Jagdish Bhagwati** (1964), because the production of de facto states is in no way extraordinary and

too small to influence world prices and consequently lead to a significant improvement in terms of trade. It is certainly possible to apply the theory of peripheral economy by Argentina's economist **Raúl Prebisch** (1959) on de facto states, based on the traditional problem of developing economies - the exchange rates particularly aggravate when prices of raw materials and basic foods with low added value grow more slowly than those of industrial products with high added value. At the same time, raw materials and basic foods make up a significant part of the exports of de facto states (with the exception of Transnistria). High value added industrial products play a significant role in their imports (this is also true for Transnistria). The result is the permanent trade deficit of all de facto states, which leads not only to economic but also political dependence on the patron state (Baar & Baarová, 2017).

## **2. Geographical and historical aspects of the declarative independence of de facto states**

Each of the de facto states is different in terms of its hypothetical possibility of international recognition. The basic quantitative indicators rank them uniquely among the over 50 microstates there are in the world, out of which more than 60 % are island states. From the point of view of their geographic location, South Ossetia-Alania and Transnistria are undoubtedly disadvantaged, although in the world, we find states with a similarly closed position between two states (Andorra, Liechtenstein, Eswatini, and the greater Mongolia). South Ossetia-Alania, however, has the disadvantage that one of its neighbour's is the motherland (Georgia) from which it is separated by a closed border barrier, which prevents economic contacts and forces the country to co-operate with the other neighbour (Russia). Transnistria is formally in an even worse position, because neither of its neighbours is friendly to the existence of the separate state, and moreover, its patron-state (Russia) also has tense relations with Ukraine – an important neighbour of Transnistria and a major transit country with a port (Odessa) important for Transnistrian export and import. Nevertheless, Transnistria did not interrupt relations with the mother country, Moldova – they trade with each other and continue to cooperate in the sports field like before separating (Baarová & Jakubek, 2019).

Although Artsakh is also limited by its disadvantageous landlocked position, it has three neighbours (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran), like Luxembourg or Paraguay, while one of the neighbours, Armenia, is a country with the same ethnic

structure, which raises the question of a future connection. However, the Azerbaijan mother state is refusing to accept the status quo and their mutual border remains to be hermetically sealed as it is in the South Ossetian case. In addition, Artsakh, with a help of Armenia, took up a piece of Azerbaijani territory that had not been its administrative part – of course, it significantly limits the chance of improving relations with the motherland. The most advantageous geographical location is that of Abkhazia with its two neighbours and access to the sea, albeit peripheral and relatively closed (like Estonia, Belize, Kuwait, Lebanon, etc.). What is important is that one of the neighbours is Russia, the patron, and then the motherland of Georgia, with whom the relations are frozen, but not as intensely as in the case of South Ossetia-Alania (Baarová, 2019).

From the point of view of the ethnic structure of the population, Abkhazia is the most similar to European states, with the majority of the population formed by Abkhazians, linguistically distinct from the neighbours of Georgia and Russia. However, their share in the total population, according to the 2011 census, exceeded the 50 % threshold only slightly. In this respect, however, we find several similar states in Europe – Bosnia and Herzegovina with only 50.1 % of Bosniaks and Montenegro with 45.0 % of Montenegrins (both in 2011). Somewhat better is the situation of Luxembourgers (55 %), Latvians (62 %), Macedonians (64 %) and Estonians (69 %) in "their" countries. In addition, Abkhazians argue in favour of their independence with a long history of their own statehood dating back to antiquity. This is, however, constantly being questioned by Georgia; in particular, that the ancient Abazins, which the Abkhazians claim their origin from, are referred to by Georgians as belonging to the Kartvelian language community, which was much later overlaid by the North Caucasian Mountain peoples, who took over the ancient ethnonym and geonym of the area they occupied in an altered form (Gamacharia, Lordkipanidze & Achaladze, 2014). The Abkhazians, however, argue that the Abazins are their ancestors who were under the Kartvelian cultural influence in antiquity, but were able to maintain their identity and in spite of their later political union with Georgia in the 11<sup>th</sup> century managed to re-establish their statehood in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Achugba, 2011). They also refer to the fact that in the Soviet period they initially gained the status of a federal republic, which they lost as a result of backstage intrigues, however, they still remained an autonomous republic.

South Ossetia-Alania is specific in the fact that it harbours only a small part of Ossetians, whose majority is located in the Russian Federation, mainly in neighbouring North Ossetia-Alania. While this subject of the Russian Federation

consists of the Ossetian population by 65 %, in South Ossetia-Alania it is 90 % according to the last census of 2015<sup>8</sup>. In Europe, a similar model case of a "non-state" nation can be found in Spain, where there is an autonomous Basque Country with a Basque crossover to France. In Asia, we would find an analogy with Baluch people, who have a federal province of Baluchestan in Pakistan and also extend beyond it to the territory of Iran (Sistan and Baluchestan province). South Ossetia, however, constitutes less than a tenth of all Ossetians, so it is paradoxical that this small community, together with Abkhazia, acquired the status of a state with partial international recognition in 2008. Even in their case, the issue of a dispute with Georgia is their settlement on the southern slopes of the Caucasus. While Ossetians claim that their ancestors lived here at the time of Alania (but its core lay in the northern foothills of the Caucasus and the adjacent steppes), Georgians consider them to be immigrants arriving in the area in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In any case, they lack the tradition of their own statehood as they created only autonomous community unions (*koms*) who cooperated with each other and with the Georgian administration.

Artsakh with almost 100 percent of the Armenians<sup>9</sup> is in fact another Armenian state, reminding us of Kosovo with its predominantly Albanian population and Albania. This model of division of a nation into two state formations is not typical for Europe, although the example of Austria as a "second German state" proves that even this atypical model can be viable<sup>10</sup>. Notwithstanding the fact that most of the ancestors of the present Austrians gave preference to a connection with Germany after both world wars. However, the Powers pushed through an independent development and Austria remained outside Germany. Similarly, in the 1990s the powers refused to recognize the proclaimed and shortly also factual independence of Republic of Srpska (or Serbian Republic)<sup>11</sup>, and forcibly re-incorporated it into Bosnia and Herzegovina

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<sup>8</sup> The Ossetian population in South Ossetia was stable for a long time – at about 67 % in the censuses of 1926-1989, and it remained the same until before the Russian-Georgian War in 2008. After that, some 13,000 Georgians left, leaving only 4,000.

<sup>9</sup> Even in their case, however, the high degree of national homogeneity was achieved by the Azerbaijani expulsion and partly by the arrival of the Armenians expelled for change from Azerbaijan.

<sup>10</sup> However, such a model is not stable, as evidenced by the model of two German or two Vietnamese states. The fact that there are still two Korean and Chinese states does not mean that this status will last for decades.

<sup>11</sup> The original name is *Republika Srpska*, correctly in English the Serbian Republic, but the government of this republic uses a semi-Anglicized term the Republic of Srpska in English translations of official

with the status of a constitutional entity. Against the will of the local Serbs who demanded joining Serbia. Co-existence with the second Bosnian-Croatian entity has been very complicated from the outset, and in 2016, President **Milorad Dodik** announced that he would seek to carry out a referendum on independence in 2018 (Remember the Republika Srpska, 2016). If that is the case and the Serbian Republic declares independence, it is very likely that there will also be demands for unification with the Republic of Serbia. In Serbia itself, there is a Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*) with a program for unification of all Serbs.

The most similar Armenia-Artsakh case is Albania-Kosovo reality. Here, too, there was initially a strong euphoria for national unification, but the intervention of the Powers in this case enabled the emergence of an independent Kosovo. According to a sociological survey, there is still very high support for a merger with Albania – 77 % in Kosovo and 68 % in Albania in 2009 (Mabry, McGarry, Moore & O'Leary, 2013, p. 182). The merger is also a part of the program of one of Kosovo's parliamentary parties named Self-determination! (*Vetëvendosje!*). And in Albania, there is a non-parliamentary Red and Black Alliance (*Aleanca Kuq e Zi*), calling for a referendum on unification with Kosovo (AK dorëzon në KQZ kërkesën..., 2013). In September 2016, **Nait Hasani**, a member of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (*Partia Demokratike e Kosovës*), also spoke for the referendum (Kosovo should have referendum..., 2016). In general, many Albanian and Kosovo politicians express that they expect unification only after they succeed in joining the European Union (Bytyci & Robinson, 2015).

Unlike the Serb entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the Albanian population of Kosovo, which have never created a separate administrative unit with elements of at least formal statehood, Artsakh's situation is different. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century, it was one of the Armenian states that were unified by the Bagratuni dynasty into the Armenian kingdom. After its downfall in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, two Armenian families survived in small princedoms, which again reunited into one known as Khachen in 1261. It was, in fact, the last Armenian state to maintain a degree of autonomy in the highly Islamic environment. After some time, it divided into five small estates (*melicates*), which were linked by a *de facto* independent Alwanian

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documents. The independent country *Republika Srbija* is called in English correctly the Republic of Serbia.

Apostolic Church<sup>12</sup>, which was only formally subordinate to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Melicates retained their autonomy until 1750, when Persia, created a khanate named Karabakh within the framework of administrative changes, and melicate territory became an integral part of it. The khanate formally survived even after the Russian occupation in 1813 – it was dissolved 7 years later<sup>13</sup>. It was restored in the form of an autonomous region called Nagorno Karabakh (somewhat smaller than the territory of Khachen melicates) in the Soviet period in 1923. Despite the prevailing Armenian population<sup>14</sup> and the great dissatisfaction of Armenians only in the form of an enclave, in addition subordinate to the Azerbaijani SSR.

Artsakh, or Nagorno Karabakh, annexation requirements were very strong even when the Armenian statehood was restored in 1918-20 and again in the early years of the Sovietization of the South Caucasian states. The Soviet system, however, sought to turn the dissatisfaction of the Caucasian nations with the new political regime into mutual hostility, and Nagorno-Karabakh was a great tool. In the late 1980s, when the requirements for the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian SSR re-emerged in connection with the liberalization processes of the then Soviet Union they became a catalyst for modern Armenian nationalism and emancipation from the USSR (Laitin & Suny, 1999, p. 147). Although Nagorno-Karabakh declared its connection with the Armenian SSR, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR cancelled it. With the collapse of the USSR, the new Armenian leadership responded pragmatically – it helped Artsakh military to secede from Azerbaijan, but it never recognized its declared independence *de jure*. However, it continued to support the newly created entity and contributed to its economic and political stabilization. While the ethnic cohesiveness continues to lead to a close cooperation between the two countries, the option of a merger is a matter of a distant future, similarly as it is in the case of Kosovo.

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<sup>12</sup> Alwanians, inaccurately referred to as Caucasian Albanians, were a North Caucasian ethnic group with developed culture. From the Armenians, they adopted Christianity, including the liturgical language. After the Islamic invasion of the Turkish Azeris, most of them were assimilated both linguistically and religiously. Only in the Artsakh are they retained the Christian faith, but Armenized fully in the meantime. The Alwanian language has died, and the language of the Christian Udi minority living in Azerbaijan (about 4,000) is most closely related to it. Another 4,000 Udis relocated to Russia.

<sup>13</sup> However, the Alwanian Church was abolished in 1830, and the local Armenians were subordinated directly to the Armenian Church.

<sup>14</sup> According to the 1926 census, Armenians accounted for 89.24 % of the Autonomous Region, and Azerbaijanis only 10.06 %. This 9:1 ratio has gradually changed as a result of Azerbaijani policy to 3.6:1 (76.92 % and 21.52 %).

Transnistria has the most interesting ethnic structure because Moldovans (31.9 %), Ukrainians (28.8 %) and Russians (30.4 %) have a roughly equal share. This structure is reminiscent of Switzerland, in which, besides German, French and Italian-speaking Swiss, there is still a small community of Rhaeto-Romanians<sup>15</sup>. Transnistria differs from Switzerland by the fact that besides ethnic groups overhanging from neighbouring Moldavia and Ukraine, there are also Russians living there – a relic of the long-term integration into Russia. And it is this very state that most of the population of Transnistria inclines to – in September 2006, 98.1 % of the participants of a referendum expressed their wish to join Russia (with 78.6 % turnout of eligible voters). The Russian Duma acknowledged the results of the referendum, but that was all it did. There were no further steps towards the merger taken by Transnistria. In April 2014, in connection with the illegal referendum in Crimea, the Transnistrian Parliament asked the Russian Duma to allow Transnistria to become a subject of the Russian Federation on the basis of the 8-year-old referendum. However, with regard to the development of events, Russia refused to discuss the possible integration of Transnistria, recommending to the separatists to negotiate with the Moldovan government. Nevertheless, in September 2016, the then Transnistrian President **Yevgeny Shevchuk** signed a law on preparation for joining Russia on the basis of the results of the 2006 referendum. The main aim of the law is to modify Transnistria's legal system so that it is in line with the Russian system (President of Transnistria..., 2016).

In response, in January 2017, Moldovan President **Igor Dodon** (strongly pro-Russian) announced that in order to resolve the Transnistrian conflict, Russian soldiers should leave from Transnistria, and the people of the whole Moldova should comment on the issue in a referendum (President of Moldova..., 2017). New Transnistrian President **Vadim Krasnoselsky** responded that Moldova could do any referendum it pleases, but Transnistria had already done it in 2006 (Reshenie Pridnestrovyya..., 2017). Before the presidential election, in June 2016, the Russian Public Opinion Research Center conducted not only an election preferences poll, but also a poll about the future of the country. The results did not differ much from the abovementioned referendum. 86 % of respondents spoke for merger with Russia, 9 % for independence and only 2 % for a reunion with Moldova (Zhiteli..., 2016). The survey did not ask for nationality but for age,

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<sup>15</sup> In Transnistria, this fourth community is represented by Bulgarians (2.8 %), unlike the Rhaeto-Romanians, however, they are not concentrated in one area.

with differences in age groups' opinion towards integration with Russia being absolutely marginal (between 84 and 88 %). Although opposition to reintegration with Moldova has remained constant for a long time, Transnistria is the only one of the de facto states which did not interrupt its contacts with the motherland. On the contrary, in May 2001, its authorities signed an agreement on the mutual recognition of documents and later on the rules of international commercial relations. At present, they are again trying to negotiate the conditions under which Transnistria could benefit from export to European Union countries. And this is probably one of the reasons for Transnistrian manoeuvring – to benefit from the advantages of the Moldovan-EU agreement as well as the Russian benefits (budget subsidy, unpaid gas supply) – while retaining the post-Soviet system of local oligarchy, which guarantees the control of political and economic structures (Baarová & Jakubek, 2019).

Russia also props up its influence in the de facto states on Russian minorities, which vary in their number and activities considerably from country to country. Russians are almost absent in Artsakh<sup>16</sup> and in South Ossetia-Alania (only 610, i.e., 0.11 %, in the census of 2015; in 1989, they represented almost 4 times larger group and accounted for 2.16 %). In Abkhazia the share of Russians fell by nearly 70 %, and in 2011, their share dropped to 9.1 %, so they are retreating to both the remaining Georgians and Armenians. Russians and Armenians are the main supporters of joining Russia. The largest proportion of Russians live in Transnistria (30.3 %), but there is also a significant proportion of Ukrainians and Moldovans who communicate commonly in Russian and thus meet the concept of the "Russian world" (Maliukevičius, 2013; Solik & Baar, 2017). Moreover, the Russians are concentrated in Tiraspol and Bender/Tighina<sup>17</sup>, but they do not have an over-all but only a simple majority (between 40-45 %). In the 2015 census, an intriguing situation occurred when a total of 14 % of people did not give a nationality, with the population dropping by 80,000 compared to the 2004 census (*Perepis naseleniya PMR*, 2015). Among the people who did not give their nationality there were mainly Ukrainians, whose share dropped to 22.9 %, and Moldovans to 28.6 %. The proportion of Russians fell only marginally to 29.1 %. For the first time, 950 people (0.2 %) claimed their nationality to be Transnistrian

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<sup>16</sup> In the 2015 census, 238 Russians (0.16 %) were counted, 171 (0.12 %) ten years earlier, but also only 1,922 (0.10 %) in 1989.

<sup>17</sup> The Moldovan authorities use the name of Tighina from the time of the Romanian administration, but the city is under the control of Transnistria and uses the name Bender (Bendery in Russian).

in the census.

Population decline is typical for all de facto states – the latest census of 2015 shows that it has fallen by half in comparison with the last Soviet census in 1989 (Table 2). The main downturn was recorded immediately after the conflicts of the 1990s, in South Ossetia-Alania, also shortly after the war in 2008, when it was estimated that only more than 30,000 inhabitants remained in their homes. Some of them returned after the situation had calmed down, however, the demographic increase is very low. Abkhazia recorded the largest drop when less than 40 % of its population remained in the country after the first war with Georgia, and to date the country has not even reached half of its population of 1989. Transnistria did not suffer any significant population loss after the conflict with Moldova, but the population is declining every year with thousands of people migrating for work, so this country also falls slowly but surely to a mere half of the last Soviet census.

The most favourable situation is reported by Artsakh, where, after the Independence War, the population decreased, but the departure of the Azerbaijanis was offset by the arrival of the Armenians fleeing from Azerbaijan. However, the numbers in the censuses are not territorially compatible – the 1989 census includes only AR Nagorno-Karabakh, but not the population of the adjacent areas gained by the separatist republic. The existing Artsakh territory is 2.6 times larger than the former ARN-K, and if we wanted to compare the entire population of Artsakh's current territory in 1989, we would have to add up to 310,000 inhabitants to the population of the ARN-K (Tsutsiev, 2007). Which means that about 500,000 people lived within the current borders. Compared to such numbers, the current population accounts for less than 30 %.

**Table 2:** Ethnic structure in % of the de facto states

De facto state	Share of Russians 1989	Share of Russians 2015	Main ethnic groups 1989	Main ethnic group 2015	Other ethnics 2015
<b>Transnistria</b>	25.5	29.1	Moldovans 39.9 Ukrainians 28.3	Moldovans 28.6	Ukrainians 22.9 Bulgarians 2.8
<b>Abkhazia</b>	14.3	9.1	Georgians 45.7 Abkhazians 17.8	Abkhazians 50.7	Georgians 19.2 Armenians 17.4
<b>S. Ossetia-A.</b>	2.2	1.1	Ossetians 66.8 Georgians 29.0	Ossetians 89.9	Georgians 7.4

<b>Artsakh</b>	1.0	0.1	Armenians 76.9 Azeris 21.5	Armenians 99.7 Azeris 0,0
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Assembled by the authors according to the official censuses: USSR 1989, Transnistria, South Ossetia-Alania and Artsakh 2015, Abkhazia 2011 (official estimates for 2015).

**Table 3: Depopulation of de facto states since 1989**

	<b>Census 1989</b>	<b>Another census (year)</b>	<b>Last census (year)</b>	<b>Share in % (1989 = 100 %)</b>
<b>Transnistria 1)</b>	868,000	555,347 (2004)	475,373 (2015)	54.8
<b>Transnistria 2)</b>	730,000	450,337 (2004)	384,176 (2015)	52.6
<b>Abkhazia 3)</b>	525,061	215,972 (2003)	240,705 (2011)	45.8
<b>S. Ossetia-Alania</b>	98,527	No census	53,532 (2015)	54.3
<b>Artsakh</b>	189,085	137,737 (2005)	145,053 (2015)	76.7

a. Transnistria without Tighina/Bender, approximated figure for 1989

b. Transnistria with Tighina/Bender, approximated figure for 1989

c. Estimates for Abkhazia in 2015 were 243,206 inhabitants, i.e., 46.3 % as compared to 1989.

### 3. Security-strategic factors for maintaining declarative independence

It is very important for each state to be able to defend its territory in the event of a military attack. It is a problem for small states, so they look for allies to help them if necessary. In this respect, all post-Soviet states are very dependent on their patrons, because without their help, the mother states would be able to re-join them under their administration, although with severe problems (in the past, for example, pacification of Biafra in Nigeria). The inhabitants of the de facto states, however, do not want to rely solely on a help of the patron, so they try to build their own defence forces. Although they are proportional to their human and economic resources, they do not lack the resolve, as they proved during the separation in the 1990s.

With respect to the permanent state of threat, the strongest army is that of Artsakh (Armiya oborony Nagornogo Karabakha, 2016). Its army was built on the basis of volunteer units formed in the war in 1992-94. Exchange of fire with Azerbaijan troops is common, the latest major clash took place in April 2016. The exact details of the Artsakh's army are not known because the army is in constant readiness and deployed according to the strategic thinking of the leadership. In

addition, it is also largely interconnected with the army of Armenia, so it is not entirely clear which armaments actually belong to Artsakh and which to Armenia (Voyenny potential Armenii..., 2016). In Artsakh, there is also an undetermined number of Armenian soldiers. As a result of the threat, at least 18,000 men are employed in the Artsakh's army (but there are also numbers indicating up to 22,000 soldiers), which is a very high number considering the population, and it is possible that the Armenian army units are also counted. This is evidenced also by the heavy armament, which in addition to the large number of tanks, armoured vehicles, howitzers or rocket launchers also includes anti-aircraft rocket complexes and Scud ballistic missiles. Since Artsakh's and Armenia's joint armed forces cannot be a match for the armed forces of Azerbaijan, in 2010 Armenia extended the agreement on dislocation of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Russian Military Base including the Air Force until 2044 (Nersisyan, 2015). Russian military forces thus balance the moderate predominance of Azerbaijan, and represent a guarantee against an external attack on Armenia and Artsakh.

More populous Transnistria has a significantly smaller army, because the threat from the motherland of Moldova is minimal. Moreover, the territory of Transnistria is divided by small stripes of land under Moldovan control, and on the contrary, Transnistria controls the large city of Bender on the western bank of the Dniester River. The army is based on a compulsory military service, which employs approximately 7,500 soldiers, but it is said to be able to activate up to 80,000 reservists (Visingr, 2015) when needed. The base consists of four small cavalry brigades in Tiraspol, Rîbnița (Russian Rybnitsa), Dubăsar (Russian Dubassary) and Bender with artillery support equipped with rocket launchers (Barchevskiy, 2014). Anti-aircraft defence is provided by several dozens of cannons and anti-aircraft complexes, almost all of the outdated Soviet production, rarely complemented by newer Russian weapons. The air force has only 6 old combat helicopters because it there is no need to worry about a military attack. The Moldovan government effectively resigned from the possibility of a military solution to the reintegration of Transnistria – it gradually sold out all the combat aircrafts and helicopters it had acquired in the division of Soviet armament and has kept only three tanks. Even the number of soldiers in active duty is lower than in Transnistria (see Table 4). From the times of the Soviet Union, however, the 14<sup>th</sup> Guards Army with 1,500 soldiers stayed in the village of Cobasna (Russian Kolbasna) in Rîbnița District (Nersisyan, 2015). In 1995, it was renamed to Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova.

Abkhazia has a relatively strong army, which is related to an effort not to rely

on Russian help as strongly as South Ossetia-Alania does. Even the Abkhaz army formed in an armed conflict with Georgia. At the beginning of the war in 1992, the Georgian army won easily, but then a large number of volunteers and mercenaries from North Caucasus regions (including Chechens) joined the fighting on the part of the Abkhaz rebels, as well as the forces from Russia, which chose to support Abkhazia. In the summer of 1993, therefore, Abkhazia could launch a successful offensive, after which the war ended in September 1993 with the armistice and de facto independence of Abkhazia, which subsequently created a regular army from its volunteers. Military forces consist of three motor rifle brigades in Sukhumi, Pitsunda and Ochamchyra, two separate regiments (artillery and training), four separate battalions (reconnaissance, mountain, engineer and airborne), a small air force with a base in Gudauta and the navy anchored in the same settlements as the cavalymen. Until recently, anti-aircraft protection was provided only by obsolete Soviet cannons and portable sets of Strela and Igla, but in 2013, Abkhazia also demonstrated Osa-AKM self-propelled missile systems (Visingr 2015). The Air Force has 7 combat aircraft (including Albatrosses of Czechoslovak production) and 3 helicopters of Soviet production. The navy has two dozen ships, mostly patrol, cannon and torpedo boats, some of which were received as a gift from Russia (not new, but discarded as obsolete). The disparity between the facilities of Abkhazia and Georgia (Table 3) is offset by Russia, which has been keeping the 7<sup>th</sup> Russian Army with 4,000 soldiers in Abkhaz territory since 2009. Under the intergovernmental treaty of November 24, 2014, joint Russian-Abkhaz troops are being formed, and Abkhazia also agreed to harmonize its defence policy with Russia (Georgia angered..., 2014). According to the treaty, the 7<sup>th</sup> Russian Military Base (the former 131<sup>st</sup> Separate Motor Rifle Brigade) and two Abkhaz motor rifle battalions, an artillery and aviation group, a special purpose division, some medical, spa and other objects are to be a part of a joint command. The treaty has been signed for 49 years and can be automatically extended for other fifteen years (Voennyye Rossii and Abkhaziya..., 2015). Officially, the creation of the joint command is declared as a prevention against military aggression from any state. It is more than clear that Georgia is meant here. According to a Russian source (Vooruzhennye sily Abkhazii, 2017), the Russian military forces in Abkhazia are comparable to the armed forces of the whole of Georgia.

The smallest army is that of South Ossetia-Alania. It also originated from volunteers who supported Russian troops in the 1991-1992 conflict with Georgia. At that time, Ossetians managed to gain control of only the northern part of the

claimed territory, the rest they gained with the support of Russia in the short summer war of 2008. Before the war the South Ossetian army had about 3,000 soldiers, after the end of the conflict it was reduced to the current 1250 and the government entrusted the defence of the country to the 4<sup>th</sup> Russian Military Base. This is not a big one (13 small battalions), however, the entire Southern Military District of the Russian Federation is available in case of any conflict with Georgia (Khrumchikhin, 2017). With regard to the financial problems, when the budget of South Ossetia-Alania is subsidized by about 90 % by Russia, the defence ministers of Russia and South Ossetia-Alania signed on 30 March 2017 a treaty to transfer the independent units of South Ossetia to the armed forces of the Russian Federation (Ministry obrony..., 2017). A possibility that Ossetian soldiers perform their military service in the Russian army is incorporated in the treaty. President Putin signed the treaty on February 5, 2018 and it thus entered into force (Putin odobril integraciyu..., 2018). Nowadays, the armed forces of the small country include three infantry battalions and eight separate rotations concentrated in the mountain town of Dzau (in Russian Dzhava). Before the war with Georgia in August 2008, around 15 tanks of Soviet origin were available, but older vehicles were moved to warehouses after the war, and nowadays, the army operates only three captured tanks modernized by the Israeli company Elbit for the Georgian Army (Visinger, 2015). It can be assumed that some other items from the South Ossetian arsenal are war prey. At army parades, several types of vehicles appeared, the origin of which is doubtlessly Georgian – such as Czechoslovak howitzers DANA and RM model 70 rocket launchers, or Turkish Otakar Cobra (Visinger, 2015).

**Table 4:** Armed forces of post-Soviet de facto states, their mother countries and Armenia

	Transnistria	Moldova	Abkhazia	S. Ossetia	Georgia	Artsakh	Armenia	Azerbaijan
<b>Active personnel</b>	500	500	200	250	7,000	8,000	44,800	66,950
<b>Reserve personnel</b>	0,000	0,000	0,000	5,000	40,000	5,000	200,000	300,000
<b>Main battle tanks</b>	8		9		9	00	109	439
<b>Infantry fighting vehicles</b>	0	0	0	2	5	23	228	774
<b>Armoured personal carriers</b>	15	55	5	0	14	00	72	98
<b>Self-propelled artillery</b>	2		4	0	7	4	232	542
<b>Attack planes and jet fighters</b>					1		2	1

<b>Attack helicopters</b>					8		0	6
<b>Levelboats</b>			0		4			6
<b>Russian armed forces</b>	500		000	000			000	

Assembled by authors according to these resources:

- a. Armiya Gruzii: novyye vooruzheniya i ucheniya v konce kalendarnogo goda (2017)
- b. Armiya oborony nagornogo Karabakha (2016)
- c. Barchevskiy, N. (2014)
- d. Global Security.org. (armed forces)
- e. Khramchikhin, A. (2017)
- f. Voyennyy potencial Armenii, Azerbaydzhana i Nagornogo Karabakha (2016)
- g. Visingr, L. (2015)
- h. Visingr, L. (2016)
- i. Vooruzhennyye sily Abkhazii (2017)

## Conclusion

All post-Soviet de facto states represent very small political entities, in terms of their geographic, military and economic parameters – comparable to roughly three dozen present micro-entities. Theoretically, they could also exist de jure, because practice shows that even microstates are able to survive in the competition of much larger states. Each of the de facto states analysed is different in terms of geographic location, historical aspects of their statehood, population and their ethnic structure. Theoretically, these factors predetermine different variations of their future. Abkhazia has undoubtedly the biggest chance for independence, similarly to Mongolia in the past – it has an open access to the sea, it can rely on a centuries-old tradition of its own statehood, the existence of a national identity with its own language and cultural traditions, and a slight predominance of Abkhazians in the overall population. This, of course, is the weakest argument, because this prevalence has been achieved at the expense of the expulsion of Georgians. And it cannot be altered by the fact that these Georgians profited from the situation when the colonial Russian regime expelled most of the Abkhaz from their own country and initiated the immigration of Georgians. Recognition of some form of independence of Abkhazia is thus dependent on the normalization of relations with Georgia and negotiations – it is also clear that these negotiations will be strongly influenced by Russia's stand. It is clear that the pro-Western orientation of Georgia is a major obstacle for Abkhazia and Russia in dealing about the status of Abkhazia.

The fate of South Ossetia-Alania is also connected. Unlike Abkhazia, this formation does not have any tradition of its own statehood, historically the area was a part of Georgian states' territory and the South Ossetian border was formed only in the Soviet era without really respecting the ethnical structure of the settlements. Geographically, it is located on the southern slopes of the Caucasus – the more valuable it is for Russia, which wants to regain its influence over the entire South Caucasus region. As in Abkhazia, there has been a significant ethnic homogenization by an expulsion of Georgians and a complete closure of borders and contacts with the motherland. The argumentation of joining all Ossetians into one political unit is reflected in the efforts of the South Ossetians to merge with North Ossetia-Alania and hence with Russia. This, moreover, not only protects the de facto state from reintegration with the mother country, but also provides for up to 90 % of the South Asian budget. Full dependence on Russia evokes a future according to the Tuva model – a connection to Russia. The later, however, is not in a hurry with full annexation, as South Ossetia-Alania can serve for further negotiation and pressure on Georgia to change its political orientation. In this case, there could be a possibility of reintegration with the mother country and various concessions of Georgia in relation to Abkhazia, where most people do not want integration with Russia, but prefer political independence.

The third Caucasian de facto state, Artsakh, has a certain tradition of statehood, like Abkhazia, even though it was a statehood in a vassal relationship. Historically, Artsakh Armenians also derive their traditions and culture from all Armenians, but at the same time their history is burdened by negative relations with Islamic neighbours, especially Turkic, of which not only Azerbaijan has crystallized, but also Turkey with its genocidal policy towards Armenians (1915-17). Dissatisfaction with the Azerbaijani policy towards Artsakh Armenians aroused irredentist tendency at the time of disintegration, which, however, Armenia could not fulfil with regard to its new position on the international scene. This was a formation that resembled the Republic of Serbian Krajina in Croatia or the Serbian Republic in Bosnia and Herzegovina (which failed to gain independence and integrate with Serbia), and Kosovo with predominantly Albanian population, which was partially successful. Artsakh is closer to the Serbian entities mentioned, because, like them, it occupied territories that had not officially been its part at the times of the Soviet Union (on the other hand, it lost small parts of its own territory). Similarly, ethnic homogenization has occurred – according to the 2015 census, there is no single Azeri in Artsakh (likewise, only a few Azeri individuals remained in Armenia itself and reciprocally, only a

minimum of Armenians in Azerbaijan). This created a situation similar to that in Czechoslovakia and Poland after the expulsion of Germans after the Second World War. Obviously, relations between Armenians and Azerbaijani are so burdened by the past that the reintegration of Artsakh into the mother country appears to be impossible, it could only occur if brute military force was applied (as in the case of Chechnya). As an option, there is a possibility of merger of Artsakh and Armenia and a territorial compensation of Azerbaijan. However, such an option is still being rejected by all actors. In any case, Artsakh has joint Armenia economically, there is a monetary union, and joint military forces have been created to defend the country against reintegration.

Paradoxically, the most populous and economically strongest de facto state of Transnistria, which, moreover, did not interrupt contacts with the mother country, has the smallest chance of international recognition. Here, it is the geographic and historical factors, which stand strongly against international recognition. Transnistria is a completely artificial political body of the Soviet era – in addition, its original border of 1924 changed significantly after two decades and it has even undergone further smaller changes after separating from Moldova. Transnistria cannot defend an independent existence by claiming a specific national structure or geographic position – in relation to its patron it is an enclave separated by the territory of Ukraine to which Transnistria belonged until 1940. Paradoxically, Ukraine is not interested in Transnistria and respects Moldova's sovereignty over this territory. This is in accordance with the international recognition of the fact that the USSR disintegrated into 15 independent states at the boundaries of the Federal Republics in force at the date of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The fact that until 1940 Transnistria never politically belonged to Moldova is interesting – this can explain Moldova's rather lax attitude towards its reintegration. For Russia, Transnistria is a tool of pressure not only on Moldova but also on Ukraine. Therefore, Russia did not recognize its declared independence and refused repeated requests by Transnistria for integration into the Russian Federation. Russia realizes that the annexation of this enclave would raise considerably more problems than the annexation of the Crimea. It would strengthen the anti-Russian mood of Ukrainians, and it could renew efforts to bring Moldova under the control of Romania. With regard to Ukraine's lack of interest concerning the ownership of Transnistria, it appears that the only option of the Transnistrian future is its reintegration with the mother country.

It is clear that the problem for de facto states is the existence of an international system which sees building a new state by separating itself from an

already existing state negatively. However, the existing states are far from being uniform, they act according to their own interests. On the example of Kosovo, we saw that the first states that recognized its declared independence were the US and most (but not all) EU Member States. However, Russia and China, and logically the original mother country – Serbia, were firmly opposed to independence. On the contrary, the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia-Alania was recognized only by Russia and 4 other small states. This also gives evidence of Russia's weaker power position – not even its close allies (such as Belarus or Kazakhstan) supported its stand, China moreover declared that it considers both separated entities to remain a part of Georgia. So, the only way how to get a wider international recognition remains obtaining agreement with the separation from the respective mother country – this has allowed the emergence of Bangladesh and Eritrea in the past.

The theory of small states shows in practice that the benefits of "smallness" cannot be used by de facto states to strengthen their political and economic prestige precisely because of the absence of international recognition and the rivalry of large states over geopolitical influence. And this is the main reason for the long-term existence of political units that have strong patrons without whose consent their return to the original state – reintegration with the mother countries – is not possible.

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