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Why de facto states fail? Lessons from the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria

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This study seeks to improve our understanding of the causes leading to the failure of de facto states. In contrast to the voluminous body of literature on sovereign state failure, the process of de facto state's failure remains under-researched. Drawing upon the existing research on state failure and de facto statehood, we narrow down our theoretical explanations to a set of causes related to civil conflict, tribalism and economic crisis. More specifically, we aim to examine the effect of tribalism, warlordism, ideological fractionalisation and economic deficiencies upon the collapse and failure of de facto entities. We employ the case study of the interwar Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (1996-1999) to demonstrate how the above detailed factors contributed towards the collapse of a de facto state.

Introduction

In 2014, armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine has led to the appearance of two de facto independent pro-Russian rebel enclaves – Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People Republic (LPR). The emergence of these new de facto entities in the heart of Eastern Europe reignited the debates on de facto statehood in Eurasia and beyond. As Russian Federation – already a patron state for Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria – provided military and financial support to DPR and LPR, scholars and practitioners alike continue to be puzzled by what makes a de facto entity sustainable. Previous theoretical studies posited that a combination of the absence of nation-building, strong military and a weak parent state, as well as a strong patron, are most likely to lead to the collapse of a de facto state (Kolstø 2006).¹ Nonetheless, research on de facto states is rife with case-study literature examining the unrecognised states' emergence and functioning, rather than their demise. The survival and persistence of de facto states has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention over the past two decades. A voluminous body of case-study literature offers a detailed analysis of de facto states' resilience and survival, drawing examples not only from the durable post-Soviet de

facto states, but also from similarly resilient and successful de facto states in Somalia, Myanmar, the Philippines and other parts of the world.

Both nuanced case study research on why and how de facto states fail, or systematic theoretical examination of the de facto states' failure, has been thus far absent from the IR and political studies literature. Nearly 40% of all de facto states tend to fail within first 24 months of their emergence (Florea 2014, 792). However, interest towards the failure of unrecognised states has thus far been rather limited. Contextualised empirical analyses of why, when and under which circumstances de facto entities collapse and cease to exist are notable by their absence. Similarly, few studies offer theoretically-grounded explanations as to which factors are likely to conduce the failure and collapse of de facto entities.

That said, this study seeks to provide an empirically rich and theoretically-guided account of de facto statehood's failure. Drawing our empirical case study from interwar Chechnya (1996-1999), we demonstrate that the failure of de facto states is a complex phenomenon that combines common factors of nation-state failure and the processes specific to de facto entities. We ground our theoretical framework in literature on both state failure and the post-WWII de facto statehood. We argue theoretically – and demonstrate it empirically on the case of the Chechen de facto state – that tribalism, warlordism, ideological fractionalisation and economic deficiencies emerge as significant determinants of the de facto states' demise. This study is the first to examine in details the effect of the four above-mentioned factors on de facto states' failure. We seek to show that the key factors identified in the literature behind the success of de facto states – such as nation-building, strong military and weak parent state – are not static indicators. Rather, these factors of the de facto statehood's success are susceptible to change that might as well lead to the collapse of the entities. We argue that although many aspects of the de facto states' failure are comparable to

the collapse and failure of sovereign states, failure processes in unrecognised states tend follow their own pathways, which remain distinguishable from nation-state failure.

This article is organised as follows. Next two sections delve into the theories of state failure and de facto statehood, seeking to link the two strands of literature. We then present a theoretically grounded explanation of how tribalism, warlordism, ideological fractionalisation and economic challenges may precipitate the failure of a de facto state. This section is followed by an empirical discussion of the Chechen case. Split into the four key themes – each covering one of the above detailed factors of de facto state failure – empirical discussion traces the collapse and ultimate demise in the late 1990s of a de facto state known as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

When states failⁱⁱ

Existing research on state failure draws close connections between the weakness, or the collapse, of a nation-state and the emergence of unrecognised polities (Rotberg 2010). The loss of state's capacity to control its territory and the weakness of its military are directly associated with the emergence of regime challengers seeking to partition the state along ethnic, sectarian or ideological divides (Kraxberger 2007). Multi-ethnic states, as well as countries with clear-cut ideological divisions are amongst the most obvious candidates for de facto secessionism in moments of state weakness and political instability.

The literature on state failure tends to prioritise two – at times mutually interdependent – failure factors. To start with, violent civil conflict is presented as a key driver of state fragility and failure that undermines state institutions, destroys infrastructure and encourages separatism (Rotberg 2010; Vinci 2008; Aliyev 2017). For instance, Rotberg (2004, 5) in his major volume on state failure identifies intrastate warfare as an inseparable attribute of the

majority of failed states. Indeed, from Afghanistan to East Timor, armed violence appears to be the crucial variable in state weakness and collapse. All eight countries currently listed by the State Fragility Indexⁱⁱⁱ as highly fragile (or failed) are affected by civil war-related violence. Five of these countries (Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Yemen), at various stages of their recent history have either hosted de facto entities, or themselves existed as de facto states.

Another major factor prioritised in state failure studies is an economic collapse that in many cases tends to directly accompany conflict-affected fragile states. Whilst in some failed states, economic challenges emerge as a result of armed conflict, for many others, economic underperformance is chronic and is often at the root of civil violence (Iqbal and Starr 2015). Poor economic performance is often intertwined with corruption and nepotism, endemic to many developing countries. Unequal distribution of revenues from natural resources in countries endowed with mineral resources have historically been behind secessionist conflicts in resources-rich ethnic regions. The emergence of such de facto entities as Biafra in Nigeria, South Sudan (before independence), as well as Katanga in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), were potentially fuelled – amongst other causes – by inherent grievances over the mismanagement of natural resources in these regions. Poor governance, corruption, political favouritism and the overall failure of development are other common causes of state failure that are often intertwined with, or precede, civil conflict and economic collapse (Iqbal and Starr 2015).

All of the above creates conditions beneficial for and conducive not only to state failure, but also for successful secessionism and the establishment of a durable de facto polity. Indeed, the cases of effective de facto statehood in the absence of parent state's fragility are few. The list of post-WWII de facto states, compiled by Florea (2014, 793), entirely consists of parent states, which had been either fragile or highly fragile through

significant periods of their modern history. This draws an inseparable link between state weakness, or failure, and the emergence of de facto states. However, the relationship between state failure and de facto statehood is not only crucial for the birth of de facto entities, but is also engraved in their own demise.

When de facto states fail

De facto states differ from recognised polities in many aspects, but they also share numerous similarities with nation-states. One of these analogies is that de facto entities are just as likely (if not more) to experience weakness, failure and collapse as recognised states.^{iv} We understand the failure of de facto states in the same terms as the failure of sovereign states (Iqbal and Starr 2015, 12). The failure of de facto states' attempt to achieve political independence does not equal to state failure and the loss by de facto entities of their capacity to control the territory and to provide their population with public goods does not mean that these states will cease to exist. As is the case with many de facto states, weakness and the failure of a parent state are conducive and beneficial towards the emergence of de facto statehood. However, many if not all de facto polities are doomed to inherit most of the weaknesses of their parent state. The lack of international recognition, absent or destroyed by war industries, often land-locked location, lack of experienced administrations, and numerous other malaises make the de facto states' plight even more precarious. The most logical assumption to be extracted from the literature on state failure is that armed conflict, economic deficiencies and poor governance should undermine de facto states as fast, or even faster, as recognised polities. Other factors that influence survival of de facto states include support from patrons, other countries or stakeholders, relations between the leadership and other actors of the parent state and the breakaway region. Bearing in mind that existing literature on

de facto statehood has already explored external factors in sufficient depth, detailed discussion of these factors is beyond the scope of this study.

Nevertheless, remarkable endurance of de facto entities in the face of all these challenges had been detailed by a large and growing body of empirical literature on de facto statehood, particularly in the former Soviet Union (Baev 1998; Kolosov and O'Loughlin 1998; Beissinger and Young 2002). One noteworthy difference between the nation-state and the de facto state failure is that the latter is very likely to culminate in the disappearance of the de facto entity and its reintegration with a parent state. This makes it even more imperative for de facto states to avoid failure at all costs. While failure of a de facto state significantly increases the likelihood of its disappearance, failed de facto state may still continue to exist for as long as its capable to ward off the attempts by parent state to absorb it.

Despite the looming threat of military invasion from a parent state, stagnant economic performance that many currently existing de facto states share, and chronically poor governance, a surprisingly high percentage of de facto entities manage to survive. Moreover, the emergence of the east Ukraine's DPR and LPR over two years ago and the imminent possibility of a Kurdish de facto entity in Syria, suggest that the numbers of de facto states continue growing. The de facto states' durability further increases the importance of understanding how and why these entities meet their end.

Research on de facto statehood maintains that effective nation-building, strong military, weakness of parent state, and the existence of a strong patron enable de facto states to survive irrespectively of their deficiencies (Kolstø 2006, 729). Most studies, however, consider the above factors as static and make few efforts to explain what happens if de facto states fail at nation-building. Are their military forces always strong? What happens when a parent state manages to overcome its weaknesses? What happens when a patron either decides to stop

supporting a de facto entity (Serb republic Krajina in Croatia), or when a de facto state does not have a patron (Tamil Eelam, Chechnya)?

The main theoretical argument of this paper is that de facto states fail due to a combination of factors, most of which are associated with armed violence, socio-political cleavages, and economic collapse. The de facto failure is a far more complex phenomenon than it is often portrayed in the literature. Conflict violence and economic deficiencies are often embedded into a patchwork of intervening factors. With that in mind, we outline tribalism, warlordism, ideological fractionalisation and economic deficiencies as key determinants of de facto failure, present in our Chechen case study and traceable in a number of other “failed” de facto entities. We do not seek to underrate the significance of other factors of de facto states’ failure, and therefore our objective is to analyse the above detailed set of four factors not as exclusive but as complimentary to other scenarios of de facto state collapse.

Tribalism

In many secessionist conflicts, clan and/or tribal identities are amongst the key sub-ethnic forms of fractionalisation (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010) and violent conflict mobilisation (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2014; 2015). Whilst for some de facto entities – particularly in post-communist Eastern Europe – clan divisions persist along oligarchic interests, or geographical origins of individuals (Donetsk clan) (Aliyev 2017; Kuzio 2014), for many other societies, clans are embedded in tribal and ethnic structures. Given that both clan- and tribe-based divisions entail fractionalisation into relatively small groups of individuals – as opposed to ethnicity-centred factionalism – it is potentially detrimental to both nation- and state-building processes. As soon as the de facto state’s nation-building

project becomes hijacked by clan and tribal interests, popular mobilisation and nationalist awareness may easily turn into clan in-fighting. Inter-clan and tribal tensions may not only undermine nation-building, but might also weaken de facto state's armed forces and scare off external patrons.

Some de facto states (for example, Somaliland and Puntland) have managed to avoid clan and tribal fractionalisation due to effective inter-clan consensus building. However, even in these two Somalian polities, nation-building processes have not succeeded in overcoming clan and tribal identities in politics (Ahmed 1999). For other de facto states, clan and tribal divisions have proven deadly. The Katanga state in eastern Congo, as well as Nigeria's Biafra, are amongst the examples of de facto states weakened by tribal divisions. In both cases, clannish and tribal disputes heavily contributed to the collapse of these entities and their forceful incorporation into the respective parent state. Tribalism has proven dangerous even for those de facto states, which have successfully achieved international recognition. The ongoing civil war between Dinka and Nuer tribes in the newly minted state of South Sudan is an example of tribalism's impact on secessionist entities. Kosovo is yet another case of a recently recognised de facto state with a deeply rooted clan conflict (Kaltcheva 2009).

Warlordism

The rise and competition for power of influential warlords, although often closely intertwined with tribalism, might prove even more deadly for de facto states. Conflicts amongst rebel commanders and various rebel factions are a well-known phenomenon in civil war studies (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012). Whilst research on warlordism in de facto states is limited, conflict amongst warlords following an effective secessionist campaign are very likely to occur. Conflicts between warlords belonging to the same rebel organisation become

particularly acute when external threat either disappears or becomes less imminent. In-fighting within Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) followed in 2013, just two years after South Sudan's independence and rapidly developed in a full-scale civil war between two prominent ex-warlords, president Salva Kiir and his deputy Riek Machar. Although South Sudan's civil conflict is fought over tribal divisions, power struggle of influential warlords had been instrumental towards the split within SPLA. In the same vein, warlordism has had a significant divisive effect on the collapse of Tamil Eelam (Stokke 2006).

The threat of warlordism is particularly destructive for newly emerged de facto states, with a recent history of civil war and the lack of economic prospects for rebel fighters. The inability of de facto states' leadership to provide employment opportunities for former rebels, either in security forces or beyond, enables warlords to keep their private armed forces and to rely on them in power struggles. Due to the potentially divisive role of power-seeking warlords in weak and fragile states, literature on state failure tends to closely associate warlordism with state failure (Rotberg 2010; Malejacq 2016; Aliyev 2016).

Ideological fractionalisation

The emergence of splinter groups with more radical ideology than the parent organisation has been a feature of many insurgent organisations (O'Balance 1981; Silke 1998). Governments of newly-emerged de facto entities are often composed of a wide diversity of former rebel groups, characterised not only by ethnic, tribal and clan-based divisions, but also by ideological boundaries. Although ideological rifts within de facto states might be embedded in ethnic divisions, tribalism and warlordism, this form of fractionalisation is best characterised by divisions along religious-sectarian or political lines. Bearing in mind that state ideology is crucial for the effective nation-building, failure of de facto leadership to

reconcile ideological differences may endanger the entire state-building project. Simply because ideological conflicts may involve larger numbers of participants and develop higher degrees of radicalisation, these conflicts might prove far more serious and consequential than tribal in-fighting, or warlord disagreements. Resolving ideological conflicts might also prove a much harder task than settling tribal or individual disagreements. Ideological rifts had been instrumental towards state fragility and failure in many parts of the world. Sectarian conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, religion-fuelled civil wars in Central African Republic and northern Nigeria, as well as south Thailand and Myanmar's Rohingya insurgencies, are amongst the examples of state failure cases induced by ideological fractionalisation.

Similarly to sovereign states, de facto polities are susceptible to ideological conflicts. Split within Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) – an organisation controlling the de facto independent Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, or ARMM, in the Philippines – contributed to the emergence of more ideologically-centred Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), as well as the al-Qaeda affiliated Abu Sayyaf group. The emergence of MILF, and particularly, of the radical Islamist Abu Sayyaf group, had been detrimental for the ARMM's autonomy and significantly limited its chances of either international recognition or cessation from the Philippines. Ideological fractionalisation has proven even more destructive for the Palestinian autonomous territories torn, amongst other challenges, by ideological rivalry between Hamas and Fatah.

Economic deficiencies

Few cases of state failure occur without economic collapse. Whilst some states tend to fail exclusively due to conflict-related causes, in the majority of cases, economic deficiencies either accompany failure or precede it (Iqbal and Starr 2015, 52-54). Bearing in mind that in

contrast to sovereign states, de facto states tend to lack developed industrial bases and have little or no experience of economic production, they are even more vulnerable to economic collapse than recognised states. Even for resource rich secessionist territories, such as Biafra, Katanga, South Sudan and many others, access to rich mineral resources did not guarantee economic security. Since many resource-rich provinces are used as mere sites of resource extraction, they rarely have appropriate industrial facilities needed to process and store fossil fuels and other natural resources.

Absence of a patron state willing to subsidise a de facto entity, presents an insurmountable challenge for newly-minted de facto states. Lacking constant funding from a patron state, such as that provided by Russia to South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and the eastern Ukrainian de facto states, many de facto polities transform into hubs of drug trade, smuggling, poaching, trade in illicit goods and items (for example, endangered wildlife), and human trafficking. Whilst Myanmar's Wa (de facto) state is renowned for its trade in protected wildlife,^v two other of Myanmar's de facto entities – Karen and Kachin states – are notorious for drug production and illicit trade in gems and timber. Tamil Eelam procured significant portion of its funding from the extortion of taxes from Tamil Diasporas abroad (Wayland 2004).

The lack of international recognition further limits the de facto states' opportunities to receive economic aid from abroad and reduces their legal financial interactions with the rest of the world. As unrecognised territories, de facto states are not entitled to economic assistance from international financial institutions, such as the World Bank or International Monetary Fund. Most international banks, companies and organisations tend to avoid dealing with de facto states and normally maintain no presence on their territory. Not only de facto states are deprived of opportunities to trade internationally, but, often due to the pressure from the parent state, are unable to even trade with their neighbours. Whilst most de facto

territories lack industrial bases, limited opportunities to export their production legally, further decrease the de facto states' chances to develop their industries.

All of the above suggests that from the moment of their inception, many de facto states remain highly vulnerable to economic downfall. Faced with economic collapse, de facto entities would be unable to provide basic public goods to the population and might find their military disintegrate into factions along tribal, sectarian, or ethnic divisions. Economic collapse would also enable the parent state to wage effective financial and trade blockade of its breakaway regions. Above all, the inability of the de facto states' leadership to demonstrate to the population that their nation-building project is not sustainable is a precursor of state failure.

De facto state failure: Chechnya (1996-99)

Following the failed hardcore-Communist coup d'état of August 1991 in Moscow, Chechnya's separatist elites declared independence from Russia in mid-September, which led to three years of semi-independent statehood. In December 1994, expecting a *Blitzkrieg*, Russian Army marched into the breakaway republic situated in the eastern part of the Muslim-majority North Caucasus. A full-fledged war followed, with Russian military deploying largely indiscriminate violence and thousands of Chechens mobilising into insurgent groups, exponential mobilisation facilitated by the persistence in Chechen society of the clan organisation and the custom of blood revenge (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015). The war cost the lives of dozens of thousands of Chechens, predominantly civilians (Cichocki 1997, 11-12). Local insurgent groups mushroomed in the course of the war, most of them driven by the idea of Chechen ethno-nationalism, managing to inflict sensitive blows to the superior invading force. As a

result of its incapacity to break the backbone of the popular resistance movement, Russian army pulled out of the rebellious republic in Fall 1996 (Dunlop 2004). This move was widely considered as Moscow's humiliating defeat to the improvised military force of a country slightly more than one million inhabitants (Oliker 2001).

Tribalism

Interwar Chechnya (1996-1999) was a country in ruins. Following an all-out war that lasted 21 months, most cities and villages – with the exception of the country's pro-Russian northern areas that evaded warfare – were decimated, with hundreds of thousands of civilians having become internal refugees or left Chechnya. According to some estimates, by late 1996, up to 70 per cent of Chechnya's housing stock had been either destroyed completely or severely damaged (Souleimanov 2006; Souleimanov and Aliyev 2016). The war annihilated Chechnya's infrastructure. Factories and processing plants were thoroughly bombarded. Roads barely existed. Healthcare, education facilities, and jobs were nearly missing, with unemployment rates reaching as high as 80 per cent and close to 100 per cent in young people.^{vi} Mines lay under roughly 5.000 hectares of Chechnya's territory, which made 15 per cent of the republic's cultivable soil. This caused frequent deaths and injuries, complicating communication, and hampering farming work (Blandy 2003).

In addition, over the course of the war, some established animosities revived between various groups of Chechen populace. To an extent, the highlanders vs. lowlanders divide braced up, boosted by what the highlanders considered as their most active engagement in the war effort compared to the urban dwellers' and lowlanders' relative inertia. Members of the "treacherous" clans and families – that is, the clans and families that allegedly cooperated with the Russian occupiers or failed to exert adequate resistance to them – were sometimes targeted

(Souleimanov 2015; Souleimanov and Aliyev 2017; Souleimanov, Aliyev, and Ratelle 2016). As Grozny's authority was weak or absent – an important condition that we detail further in the article – lawlessness spread across the republic following Russian military's withdrawal from Chechnya in the fall of 1996.

Against the background of post-war anarchy and economic decline, the societal role of Chechen clan – the age-old institute of patrilineally-defined kinship – increased as the single source of social security for the population. To survive, relatives took increased care of each other, both economically and as protectors. Thousands of Chechens with damaged or destroyed houses, particularly those stemming from the heavily bombarded urban areas, sought refuge in the villages inhabited by their relatives. Those who lacked financial resources were supported by their relatives who were lucky enough to live off their undamaged livestock. In the situation of self-help, relatives sought to stick with each other in order to survive attacks by antagonised clans or simply defend their interests and honour.^{vii} All in all, this contributed to the upswing of clan-based solidarity networks or, as this phenomenon has been widely termed, tribalism.^{viii}

The post-war rise of Chechen clan was an important factor undermining the authority of the central government in Grozny. On the one hand, the persistence of Chechen clan was crucial for the survival of the entire post-war generation. On the other hand, Chechen clan and the related mind set of clan-based in-group favouritism and out-group mistrust and discrimination implied that those in the leading positions in Grozny and elsewhere sought to assert their relatives' interests at the expense of the abstract idea of the Chechen people's or Chechen nation-state's shared interest. Formal and informal positions in the republic were held by the relatives of local chiefs, with professional merit playing minimal or no role in their (informal) appointments. Clan-based particularism led to the frequent embezzlement of thin funds allocated from Grozny to the provinces. Overall, attributing a strong personal element to republican and local politics, clan-based particularism generated immense tension in Chechen

society while paralyzing the institutions of Chechen state and reducing popular trust in it. Intriguingly, Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov^{ix} himself, albeit being initially opposed to clan particularism, soon came to appoint the members of his clan in the leading governmental positions in order to ensure the integrity and continuity of his office's policies (Souleimanov 2006, 130).

This having been said, for most Chechens struggling for everyday survival, what mattered was the effective institute of clan solidarity. Kinship networks, unlike the ill-functioning or absent central government, enabled most Chechen families to make the ends meet; it was their relatives who were capable and willing to provide support to them, not the ephemeral Chechen state.

Warlordism

Related to Chechen clan-based particularism was the persistence of strong warlord elite in post-war Chechnya. At the beginning of his term in office in early 1997, Maskhadov “was already confronted with the necessity of finding arrangements with various war chiefs [warlords] who strengthened their fiefs during the war and did not intend to submit themselves to a man who was nevertheless the leader of the Chechen army” (Merlin 2012). In early 1997, Maskhadov indeed gave important positions in the government to leading “brigadier generals”, including Shamil Basayev,^x who was appointed the country's first vice-premier, as well as to Aslan Ismailov, Aslanbek Abdulkhajiyeu, and Ruslan Gilayev (Tarasov 1997, 3). Maskhadov's initiative was to win over the key warlords, cementing their loyalty to the central government in Grozny.

Others were less successful though. In fact, soon thereafter, many leading war veterans, particularly warlords, saw the collapse of their ambitious expectations to attain power and

prestige in the newly established state institutions. Post-war Chechnya's resources were simply too limited to accommodate all aspirants and their far-reaching expectations. Many warlords who saw themselves unjustly deprived of the fair share of the republic's economic and political pie soon took an immense dislike in the central authority in Grozny. Instead of disarming their units – or acknowledging the superiority of the central government in Grozny – dozens of warlords thus sought to strengthen control over their respective “spheres of influence”, usually native villages, while recognising Grozny's central authority only symbolically or refusing to recognise it whatsoever.

Claiming that they only recognised “Allah's supremacy” – and questioning the legitimacy of the Grozny government – the warlords solidified their military and political power, often at the expense of the competing clans. This, too, contributed to the strengthening of clan solidarity. In some occasions, heated confrontation led to armed clashes, with which Grozny usually hesitated to interfere. As warlords usually led their respective units, made up of their neighbours or clan relatives, the difficulty in the warlords' return to peaceful life complicated the reintegration of ordinary war veterans as well (Merlin 2012). To address this pressing challenge, Maskhadov famously declared in his 1998 appeal to the nation that

[w]e spent many long years walking along the path of war with certainty and dignity: However, now we have suddenly changed entirely. Yesterday's comrades-in-arms look at one another with mistrust because the seed of discord has been sown amongst them and its name is ambition for power!^{xi}

Under these circumstances, for Maskhadov to claim back control over the rebellious warlords-controlled areas could lead to a full-fledged military confrontation and civil war. To avoid the

latter, the Chechen president choose to tolerate the existence of warlord-dominated “fiefdoms”, which further weakened Chechen state institutions.

The situation was exacerbated by some warlords’ involvement in criminal activities both in Chechnya and in Russia. By the late 1990s, kidnappings in order to exert ransom, confiscation of property, illegal exploitation of Chechen oil wells, and business with stolen cars became a daily norm (Lo and Kwok 2012, 38). Grozny’s lack of ability to put an end to these activities further weakened the idea of Chechen statehood in general and Maskhadov’s reputation in particular, while boosting kin solidarity.

Ideological fractionalisation

Intertwined with the above two factors were the ideological frictions that afflicted Chechen elites *and* population in the interwar period. In fact, drawing on ideological considerations, an influential segment of Chechen “brigadier generals”, led by the infamous warlord Shamil Basayev, soon challenged the authority of the central government in Grozny in general and of president Maskhadov in particular. Inspired by Salafi-jihadism, an ideology imported in the country in the early 1990s by the Middle Eastern missionaries and particularly ethnic-Arab foreign fighters, Basayev and his associates grew increasingly opposed to the secularist rule of president Maskhadov.^{xii}

Against the background of the jihadists’ increasingly strong standing in the republic, two warring camps soon crystallised. One camp was made up of the nationalists or *Ichkerians* who adhered to the traditional Sufi *virids* (brotherhoods). Albeit the Ichkerians’ attitude towards the central authority in Grozny was ambivalent, with many leading Ichkerians holding sceptical or autonomist stance toward Maskhadov’s regime and others refusing to acknowledge Grozny’s authority on the ground, they generally supported the idea of secular Chechen state,

albeit with religious elements. The opposing camp was represented by Salafi-jihadists, a highly disciplined and tight-knit community of ethnic-Chechens and foreign fighters. Salafi-jihadists, who had acquired fame for military successes in the 1994-1996 war, disputed the very legitimacy of Chechen nation-state, which they considered un-Islamic, calling for the establishment of a Salafi theocracy instead (Rich and Conduit 2015; Wilhelmsen 2005).

While Maskhadov initially sought to achieve social consensus, for instance calling in 1998 for the incorporation of *sharia*-based legal principles into Chechnya's jurisdiction, his efforts fell short of accommodating the increasingly self-confident Salafi community. Maskhadov's efforts to win Basayev over eventually failed, as well. In 1998, Basayev (who earlier resigned from the position of deputy prime minister) was again given the post of prime minister, while Basayev's younger brother Shirwani was appointed to the lucrative position of the Director of the State Committee for Energy Resources. Yet in mid-1998, Basayev again resigned, allegedly because of the Chechen president's incapacity to execute his plans. Upon his resignation, Basayev further strengthened his alliance with the jihadists.

In June 1998, the tension between Sufi and Salafi elites reached their peak during the armed clashes in Chechnya's second largest city of Gudermes, in which around 50 gunmen, predominantly Salafis, were killed by Maskhadov loyalists. Soon thereafter, Maskhadov dismissed Salafi ministers and sympathizers and urged Chechens to expel "Wahhabis", as Salafis were pejoratively named, from their neighbourhoods and villages. In fall 1998, a congress of Chechen Muslim clergy took place in Grozny, which formally outlawed Salafis, accusing them of extremism, heresy, and plans to topple the legitimate government (Souleimanov 2006, 142). Still, Grozny sought to eschew massive armed confrontation with the Salafis, with numerically superior Maskhadov loyalists refraining from targeting the Salafi groups.

Nevertheless, in early 1999, in an effort to strengthen the legitimacy of his government and to scupper the Salafis' plans to declare an Islamic theocracy, Maskhadov announced the establishment of a full-fledged sharia government. While this move was welcomed reservedly by Ichkerian elites and secularly minded stratum of Chechen populace, the Salafis sought to capitalise on it to the fullest. In Basayev's words, "our president has finally accepted Islam. He is no longer the president; hence we should elect an imam" (Souleimanov 2006, 142). Hence, this initiative to bridge the warring camps of Chechen society, it soon proved counterproductive.

In a similar vein, the Sufi-Salafi sectarian face-off spread across the country affecting the lives of ordinary people. In line with their religious dogma, Salafis considered heretical the veneration of Sufi saints along with some "pagan" practices associated with Chechen "folk Islam" (Meijer 2009). Sometimes, they deliberately destroyed the sites of pilgrimage of Sufi saints (*murshids* and *ustadhs*) and showed utmost disrespect toward what they saw as customs unrelated to the "true" Islam. Salafis also questioned the notion of clan solidarity along with the norms of the *adat*, Chechen customary law, enshrined in the socio-cultural foundations of Chechen society. The Salafis' explicit lack of respect toward clan elderly (*vokkhstag*), unheard of in the deeply patriarchal Chechnya, frequently led to the split of Chechen clans, from which the "Arabised youth" was expelled.^{xiii}

Oftentimes, theological discord penetrated not only the social fabric of Chechen clans. It also led to violent confrontation between members of neighbouring – Sufi and Salafi-majority – villages. Sectarian violence driven by ideological fractionalisation further impaired the idea of Chechen nation-state, undermining its social and ideo-political foundations. The majority of those supporting the Salafis or self-identifying as Salafis increasingly resented Maskhadov's alien and presumably non-Islamic government in Grozny, refusing to acknowledge his authority. At the same time, many Sufi nationalists grew increasingly

sceptical toward Maskhadov's regime, accusing him of his incapacity to adequately cope with the "Wahhabi" threat (Bedford and Souleimanov 2016; Aliyev 2010). As a result, toward 1998-1999, Chechnya effectively turned into a failed state as the government grew increasingly incapable of policing the territory.

Economic deficiency

By 1996, Chechnya's formal economy, infrastructure, and industry had been completely destroyed. Following the war, chemical industry, an important segment of the republic's economy in the Soviet decades, already dramatically weakened in the early 1990s, was defunct. Most oil wells, scattered across the republic's central areas, were controlled by warlords who were involved in its illegal exploitation and exports. By 1998, around 843.000 tons of oil had been produced – and sold out – illegally in Chechnya, without Grozny's control (Zurcher 2007, 104). Thus, the Grozny authorities had no sufficient income from the republic's relatively significant oil reserves; nor were they capable of extorting taxes from the illegal exploitation of Chechnya's oil reserves (ibid.).

This having been said, interwar Chechnya's shadow economy – involving ransom money acquired from kidnappings, robberies, illegal seizure of property, illegal trade – was sizeable. According to some estimates, kidnappers alone procured around 200 million dollars in the three-year period of Chechnya's de facto independence (Tishkov 2004, 114). Maskhadov's episodic efforts to consolidate control over the republic's oil exploitation failed, and "Maskhadov was thus robbed of the possibility of stabilizing his regime by means of a patron-client network redistributing oil revenues" (Zurcher 2007, 104). In the interwar period, only about 10 per cent of Chechnya's population was legally employed (Moskalev 1996).

In the early years of interwar Chechnya, Maskhadov's government sought to pressure Moscow to invest in the rebuilding of the devastated country. Russian and Chechen authorities were engaged in talks on making Chechnya a free-trade zone with special tax concessions. There was general consensus that Chechnya would remain in the rouble zone, likely remaining part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) economically, financially and politically. Importantly, even Chechen radicals, for instance, Basayev, admitted Chechnya should remain in Russia's economic and energy spheres (Batuev 1997, 8). However, reaching an agreement on the size and conditions of economic support for Chechnya proved eventually impossible. On the one hand, Grozny insisted on acquiring Russian economic support – or even war reparations – regardless of discussion of Chechnya's legal status. On the other hand, Moscow conditioned its economic support for Chechnya by cementing the breakaway republic's subordinate standing toward the federal centre. Russian authorities also prompted Chechen authorities' efforts to crack down on illegal businesses run from Chechnya-based warlords, which posed a serious threat to the socio-economic security of Russia's southern provinces. In fact,

Russian politicians feared that the Chechens would take the most advantageous way: in terms of the economy, to stay in Russia, while politically pursuing independence [...] Moscow has been unwilling to render Chechnya large-scale economic assistance, unless the Chechen leadership agrees to power sharing between the federal centre and Chechnya as a 'member' of the federation (Oguz 1997, 4).

In early 1997, Moscow made clear to the newly elected Maskhadov government that it could only allocate around 757 billion roubles allocated to Chechnya in the 1997, a promise that

eventually failed to materialise due to Moscow's and Groznys' critically opposing views. At the same time, Moscow dismissed Chechnya's demands for paying war reparations (Katin 1997, 1-3). Moreover, Grozny dismissed the so-called Tatarstan model. This model, advocated by Moscow, sought to render Chechnya considerable fiscal autonomy within Russia's political and economic spheres.

Afterword

In August 1999, a joint Chechen-Dagestani Salafi-jihadist force invaded the westernmost areas of the neighbouring republic of Dagestan. Led by Basayev and his ethnically diverse jihadist *entourage*, the invasion's declared goal was to aid a group of Salafi-dominated villages in central Dagestan, a multi-ethnic Sunni-majority autonomous republic to the east of Chechnya. The Chechen-Dagestani invaders, supported by dozens of foreign fighters, apparently sought to instigate a large anti-Russian rebellion first in Dagestan and then across the whole of the Russian-dominated North Caucasus. Basayev himself used the invasion to declare himself the *imam* of a united theocracy of Chechnya and Dagestan – and oust Maskhadov as head of the Chechen nation-state that was now seen as out-to-date. While the attack soon proved to be a complete disaster, with Dagestanis mobilising to resist the Salafi invaders, the invasion alongside the bomb blasts in apartment buildings in Russian cities itself were used by Moscow as a pretext to re-launch war on Chechnya.^{xiv} Maskhadov's feverish efforts to regain control over the Basayev group – or strike a compromise deal with Moscow in order to pull back an evolving military confrontation with Russia – ultimately failed as neither Basayev nor Kremlin showed interest in negotiating with Grozny (Williams 1999). Having reorganised military considerably, Russian army regained control over Chechnya by the early 2000, leading to a protracted insurgency and counterinsurgency that has been underway since (Kramer 2005;

Dannreuther and March 2008; Ratelle and Souleimanov 2016; Souleimanov 2015; Souleimanov and Aliyev 2017; Aliyev 2016). While the Russian invasion of 1999-2000 was the main factor leading to the ultimate fall of Chechen statehood, we show in this article that four under-researched in the literature on de facto state failure causes, tribalism, economic deficiency, warlordism, and ideological fractionalisation, had prior to the beginning of the Second Russian-Chechen War led to the collapse/failure of Chechnya's de facto statehood.

Conclusion

The Chechen de facto state was born out of civil war similarly to many other de facto polities. It was not economically self-sustainable and lacked external patron who would provide it with economic aid and some form of protection. However, the economic deficiency was accompanied by deeply-rooted disagreements within the separatist movement. Clan divisions, warlord politics and sectarian rifts had undermined Chechen nation-building processes at their early stages. A combination of the above detailed causes contributed to state failure in Chechnya well before the 1999 Russian invasion. Whilst the international community remained sympathetic to the plight of Chechens, few international actors favoured the idea of Chechen independence and were willing to openly support the Chechen de facto state. Internal weaknesses shattered Chechen armed forces transforming military into a patchwork of warlord bands, making the de facto entity vulnerable to external aggression. The weakness of the parent state – Russian Federation – which it had demonstrated during the First Chechnya War, was not a static condition. As a matter of fact, the failure of Chechen nation- and state-building was accompanied by the strengthening of these processes in the Russian Federation.

Similarly to fragile and failing sovereign states, de facto entities are likely to be affected by analogous failure factors, most of which are related to civil violence and the economic collapse. The Chechen case demonstrates that these failure factors become even more acute in de facto entities, which usually lack the experience of statehood. In the 1990s Chechnya, high levels of national self-consciousness contributed to the rise of Chechen nationalism, which in its turn enabled Chechen separatists to succeed during the First Chechnya War. However, the failure of independent Chechen nation-building in the inter-war period demonstrated that nationalism does not ensure the success of de facto statehood and that nation-building is vulnerable to internal cleavages.

Deep divisions within the separatist camp, economic crisis, which was both a result and cause of Chechen society's internal divisions, along with the ability of the parent state to overcome its weaknesses had to various degrees contributed to the collapse of Chechen statehood. Since all of these deficiencies are not specific to the Chechen case, but notable in many other de facto states, including the failed cases (Krajina, Tamil Eelam, Biafra, Katanga), de facto states are likely to suffer from similar failure-factors. That said, this study opens avenues for future research on the topic of de facto states' failure, emphasising the need to examine not only the rise but also fall of de facto statehood. The most obvious observation to emerge from this analysis is that de facto states are not immune to failure, and that failure occurs not simply as a result of failed nation-building, military weakness and the strength of a parent state, but due to a complex synthesis of internal divisions and economic crises.

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Notes

ⁱ We borrow our definition of de facto state from Florea (2014, 791-92), who describes as de facto state a polity that belongs to a recognised state, but seeks independence, and that exerts military control over its territory, provides basic governance, lacks international recognition and has managed to survive for at least 24 months. We prefer Florea's (2014) definition over other definitions of de facto state (for example, Kolstø's (2006) definition), as it enables us to include a broader range of de facto entities, particularly in the post-Soviet region. This definition also allows to cover most types of unrecognised political entities in post-WWII period, as detailed by Florea (2014).

ⁱⁱ We use Iqbal and Starr's (2015, 12) generic definition of state failure, which is "focused on the complete collapse of state authority."

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- iii See <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/>.
- iv For complete list of failed and successful unrecognised polities, see Florea (2014, 793).
- v See more on BBC News “Drugs, money and wildlife in Myanmar's most secret state”, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37996473>
- vi See *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 28, 1997.
- vii Authors’ discussions with dozens of Chechen survivors of the First (and Second) Russian-Chechen wars.
- viii Distinct terms are used to refer to clans (*nekye*) and tribes (*teip*) in Chechen society. For the purpose of this article and to integrate its findings into general literature, a broader term tribe is used.
- ix Aslan Maskhadov was the third president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, following the legendary Jokhar Dudayev (1991-1996) and Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev (1996-1997). A former Soviet military officer, Maskhadov was initially sympathetic to Dudayev’s idea of establishing strong and unified secular statehood.
- x Shamil Basayev was a key Chechen warlord. Considered by many Chechens a hero and a traitor, he played an important role in shaping Chechen resistance during the First Russo-Chechen War, in aligning Chechen insurgent groups with jihadist foreign fighters in the interwar period, and ultimately in contributing to the relaunch of the Second Russian-Chechen War.
- xi Cited according to Valeriy Tishkov, *Obshchestvo v vooruzennom konflikte (A Society in the Armed Conflict)*, 447.
- xii Rumours had it that Basayev grew increasingly antagonistic toward Maskhadov having lost elections to him in late 1996, a fact that Basayev never made peace with.
- xiii Authors’ numerous discussions with Chechen eyewitnesses, 2002-2015.

xiv In late August and September 1999, a series of terrorist attacks hit apartment buildings in the Russian cities of Buynaksk, Volgodonsk, and Moscow, killing around 300 people. The attacks were widely attributed to the alleged Chechen terrorists' frustration with their failed invasion to Dagestan, which galvanised Russian public opinion preparing it for the re-launch of an unpopular war against Chechnya. According to some analysts, these attacks were staged by Russian secret services to pave the ground for an invasion, which would help then-prime minister Vladimir Putin acquire power in the country. For a detailed analysis of this critical episode of Russia's post-Soviet history, see Dunlop (1998).