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Toal, Gerard; O'Loughlin, John

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Public Opinion in the Eurasian De Facto States

By Gerard Toal (Virginia Tech, Alexandria, VA) and John O'Loughlin (University of Colorado Boulder)

Abstract

Developing reliable social scientific knowledge about public opinion in de facto states is a challenging exercise. Since 2008 we cooperated with a variety of research partners to organize a series of social scientific surveys in all four de facto states in the post-Soviet region, organizing an initial round of surveys in 2010–2011 and a follow-up round in December 2014. In this contribution we summarize the responses by declared nationality to two questions asked in 2010–11 and then again in 2013–2014: preferred future status and trust in the president. We show the results for nationalities because these values tend to be most distinctive and indicate some of the key divides in the de facto states.

Introduction

Over the last decade and a half social science research on Eurasia's de facto states has deepened our knowledge of these enduring yet isolated and unacknowledged political entities. In 2001 Charles King described these aspiring countries as "information black holes". Since that time researchers have engaged and documented in some detail the political dynamics of de facto states, particularly electoral events.

Developing reliable social scientific knowledge about public opinion in de facto states, however, is a challenging exercise. Firstly, researchers face the same problems that trouble public opinion research in many countries. Census data may be outdated and accurate population distributions and numbers require inference and estimating from other sources. Permission to conduct research can sometimes be difficult to obtain from governing authorities. Respondents, especially minorities, are sometimes cagey about sharing their opinions, especially about political leaders and the state of affairs in their country.

Secondly, de facto states pose unique problems for public opinion research. Laws by parent states against unapproved travel to de facto states complicate outsiders' access to the research site. Policies designed to isolate and de-legitimize de facto states by parent states (e.g. Georgia for Abkhazia and South Ossetia), can effectively criminalize research in these regions, irrespective of its intellectual merits and news impact. Research results that simply present the views of residents, and complicate or contradict parent state narratives can elicit hostility and denunciation from these governments. De facto state authorities exhibit similar political sensitivities. Research by foreign academics can be viewed with considerable suspicion and queries about the motives for the work can quickly become conspiratorial. Inevitably the unresolved and ongoing dynamics of conflicts affect the research itself though registering this tension through the questions asked of respondents is part of the value of such research. A further complica-

tion is that inter-ethnic tensions, and translation issues, in certain locations can pose significant challenges to the research gathering process.

In 2008 we were awarded a research grant from the US National Science Foundation to study the contemporary dynamics of post-Soviet de facto states in light of the independence of Kosovo. We received another grant in April 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea that extended the geographic range of the surveys to the contested regions of south-east Ukraine and the Crimean peninsula. We received this research funding in an open academic process involving peer review ranking of competing social scientific research proposals using international scholarly standards. Since 2008 we cooperated with a variety of research partners to organize a series of social scientific surveys in all four de facto states (Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh), organizing an initial round of surveys in 2010–2011 and a follow-up round in December 2014 (we did not survey in Karabakh in 2014; we draw upon a survey by our colleague Kristin Bakke conducted in 2013 for comparative purposes).

We were able to surmount the considerable challenges to research in the following ways. First, we worked with local academic researchers to identify and interview potential survey research firms. We subsequently met with representatives of these firms and explained our survey project. Because of our prior experience with survey research in the North Caucasus through the Levada Center (Moscow), we had established relationships that we were able to use to help us achieve our aims. The Levada Center, an independent Russian survey company, ended up supervising our research efforts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria (in 2014). In Karabakh, we used a reputable firm based in Yerevan.

Second, we visited all four locations and conducted elite interviews with local authorities as well as NGOs. We stressed the open scientific nature of our work and shared parts of our sample questionnaire. We made one concession in our survey instrument in some localities;

we did not ask respondents directly about the trustworthiness of the serving local president. Instead, we asked this question without naming the politician.

Third, through work with local academics, we were able to devise reliable estimates of populations and developed appropriate sample designs. The process of data collection was not always smooth. Because of our visits, authorities were generally aware of our research projects in 2010–11. By 2014, however, the political situation was much tenser after the conflict in Ukraine and we chose, on the advice of our partners, to adopt a lower profile in conducting the research. It is regrettable but over the course of the last decade, public opinion research in de facto states has become more difficult to conduct.

We have detailed the results of our research on de facto states in a series of publications over the last number of years (see “further readings” at the end of this text). More details on the survey methodology and designs of the samples are available there. In this contribution we summarize the responses by declared nationality to two questions asked in 2010–11 and then again in 2013–2014: preferred future status and trust in the president. We show the results for nationalities because these values tend to be most distinctive and indicate some of the key divides in the de facto states.

Attitudes Towards Future Status of the De Facto Republics

Figure 1 on p. 18 summarizes in generic language the choices we presented to respondents in the four de facto states over the last number of years. In the individual surveys these choices were stated in explicit language. Thus, respondents in Abkhazia, Transnistria and South Ossetia were asked if they preferred unity with Russia (patron) whereas Karabakh residents were asked about Armenia in 2011 and 2013 (by Kristin Bakke in a survey that repeated many of our 2011 questions). As Figure 1 reveals, the results are broadly consistent over the two periods of the surveys, despite the geopolitical upheaval in nearby Ukraine.

The situation in Abkhazia is the most complex. A multi-ethnic territory where the titular nation has, in effect, established an ethnocratic polity, Abkhazia is riven by different status aspirations amongst its constituent ethnicities. Officially (2011 census data, which enumerated just over 240,000 people) ethnic Abkhaz make up slightly over half of the population of Abkhazia, with Armenians and Georgians both approaching a fifth and ethnic Russians a tenth of all residents. A clear majority of ethnic Abkhaz prefer the current political system, which is an independent Abkhazian state where they predominate. Ethnic Armenians and Russians, by contrast, are much more ambivalent about the current system

in Abkhazia. A majority of Armenians preferred unity with Russia in 2010, more than even ethnic Russians living in Abkhazia at that time. By 2014, the desire for unity with Russia among Armenians had dipped a little while it had risen considerably amongst ethnic Russians. A good indication of the sensitivity of the question for Georgians living in Abkhazia is the high ‘hard to say/refuse’ response in 2010, a response that diminished in 2014 when more felt able to declare that their aspiration was for Abkhazia to join Georgia (again). Prior to the December 2014 survey, Abkhazia had experienced political turmoil and the election of a new president Raul Khajimba. In November 2014 he and President Putin signed a new security treaty that deepened military and economic ties between their states, a move unpopular with some ethnic Abkhaz political figures (not to mention the Georgian state authorities).

The situations in South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh are more straightforward. Both spaces are now overwhelmingly ethnically homogeneous, a consequence of war and forced displacement in the early 1990s and in 2008. In South Ossetia, the residual population aspires to unification with fellow Ossetians in the Russian Federation. There are still a few ethnic Georgians living in Ossetia but they tend to be elderly and mostly in the rayon of Akhagori (Leningor). We were unable to obtain a representative sample of this population and we thus do not show them here. In April 2017, voters in South Ossetia approved changing the name of their entity from “Republic of South Ossetia” to “Republic of South Ossetia—the State of Alania” (“South Ossetia–Alania” for short), a deliberate gesture asserting symmetry with the Russian Federation’s North Caucasian ethnic republic, North Ossetia–Alania.

Transnistria is also a multi-ethnic polity but one with less fraught legacies of violence and displacement. In 2010 most residents preferred unity with Russia over their own political system or re-unification with Moldova. By 2014, that sentiment had deepened—a function of many factors. Unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the wake of the August 2008 war, Transnistria never received recognition of its de facto statehood by the Russian Federation. In 2014, as Crimea was annexed and activists sought to have the Donbas join Russia, the Transnistrian Soviet requested that Moscow consider its application to join Russia, too. This appeal went nowhere but the sentiment, nevertheless, remained strong on the ground.

Attitudes Towards the Presidents in the De Facto Republics

As part of a suite of questions about trust in local governmental institutions and in foreign leaders, we repeated

a question in both time periods and for all four de facto republics on trust in the local presidential leader (all have presidential political systems). We did not specify the leader's name but simply asked respondents to scale their trust on a "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" scale in 2013–14 and to give a simple yes-no answer in 2010–11. The results are shown in Figure 2 on p. 19 and by combining the agree (strongly and mostly) and disagree (strongly and mostly) for 2013–14, we can compare the results over time. What changed of course is the leadership in all the republics, except in Nagorno-Karabakh where Bako Sakhayan remained in power. Thus, the results show both a general distrust-trust in the institution as well as a rating of the respective presidents. For that reason, generalizations across the samples are difficult to make.

Important differences between the republics over time are evident in the graphs. The change in leadership in Abkhazia from Sergey Bagapsh in 2010 to Raul Khajimba in 2014 was accompanied by a large drop in trust by all ethnic groups in the republic, with Georgians and Russians showing more distrust than trust in the new leader as political uncertainty continued about the nature of relations with Russia and the distribution of power. South Ossetia demonstrated the most consistent level of trust in the President with a majority showing trust in both Eduard Kokoity (2010) and Leonid Tibilov (2014). Similarly, Nagorno-Karabakh shows a strong and consistent level of trust for President Sakhayan over the period 2011–13 at over 80%.

Transnistria has the most dramatic change. Our 2011 survey was completed in the last months of the unpopular Presidency of Igor Smirnov. His successor, Yevgeny Shevchuk, gained a much higher level of trust among the three main nationalities in December 2014 at a time of increased dependence on Russia and when the Transnistrian government was trying to become more integrated into that country. Partly as a consequence of the ongoing economic crisis in the republic and support for his opponent by the powerful Sheriff conglomerate, Shevchuk was defeated in December 2016 by Vadim Krasnoselsky.

Conclusions

The results of our surveys in the de facto republics show many differences concerning political preferences and trust in state institutions. These preferences are influenced by both regional changes in economic linkages that have domestic implications and in geopolitical developments especially with respect to Russia's military actions and foreign policy decisions such as recognition of statehood in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. What can be stated is that the building of legitimacy of state institutions remains among the key prerequisites for political leaders in the de facto republics. They can rely on a general level of support in the face of perceived external threats but their own tenure requires more than predictable opposition to parent states. In short, they must also deliver as politicians on local terms to their constituents.

About the Authors

Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail) is Professor of Government and International Affairs in the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech's campus in the metro Washington region. He received a Ph.D. in geography from Syracuse University (1989). Besides numerous research articles and chapters, he is the author of *Critical Geopolitics* (Routledge, 1996) and co-author of *Bosnia Remade: Ethnic Cleansing and its Reversal* (Oxford University Press, 2011). His latest book is *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest for Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

John O'Loughlin is College Professor of Distinction and Professor of Geography at the University of Colorado-Boulder, USA. His research interests are in the geography of conflict, including the Caucasus-Black Sea region and the relationship between climate change and conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Further Reading

- O'Loughlin, John, Vladimir Kolosov and Gerard Toal (2014): 'Inside the post-Soviet de facto states: A comparison of attitudes in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 55.5: 423–456.
- O'Loughlin, John, Gerard Toal and Vladimir Kolosov (2016): 'Who identifies with the "Russian world": Geopolitical attitudes in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57.6: 745–778.

Figure 1: Attitudes Towards Future Status of the De Facto Republics

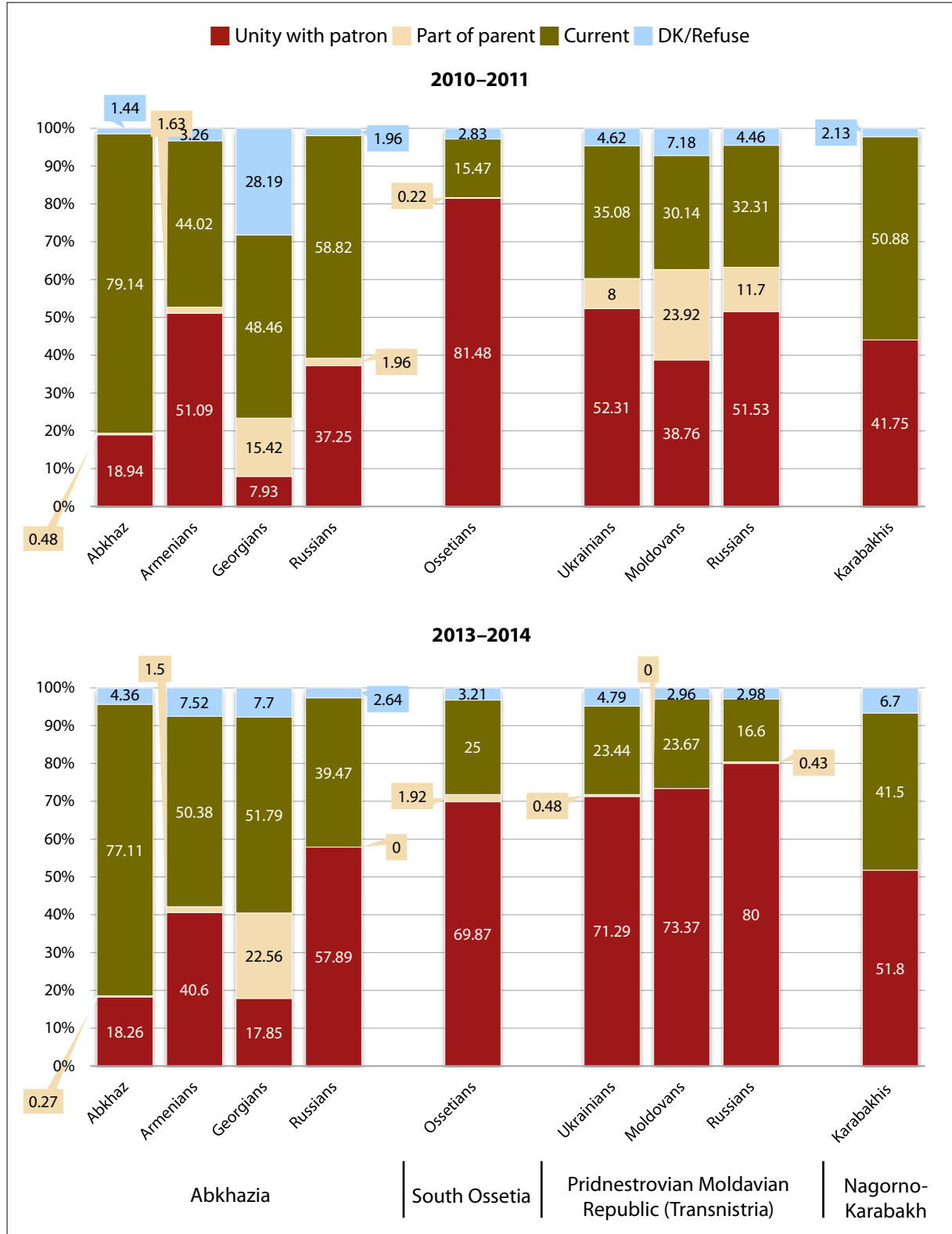
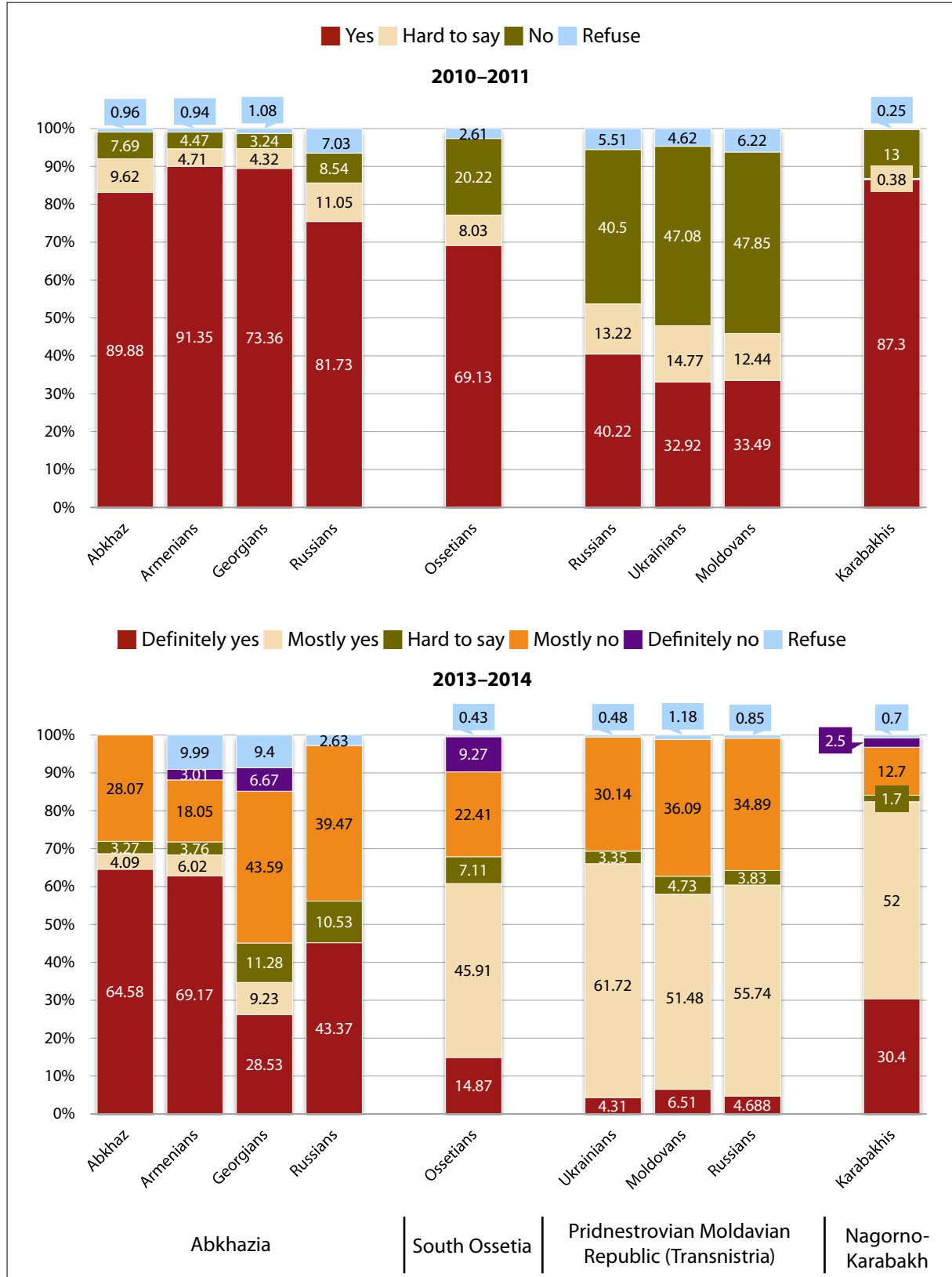


Figure 2: Trust in the President



DOCUMENTATION

Basic Data and Political Systems of South Caucasus De Facto States

Table 1: Basic Data Regarding South Caucasus De Facto States

	Abkhazia	Nagorno-Karabakh	South Ossetia
Size	8,660 km ²	4,400 km ^{2*}	3,900 km ²
Population**	240,000	150,000	35,000–50,000
Ethnic Composition	50% Abkhaz 20% Armenian 20% Georgian	99% Armenian	90% Ossetian
Patron State	Russia	Armenia	Russia
Base State	Georgia	Azerbaijan	Georgia
Recognition from UN member states	Russia Nicaragua Venezuela Nauru	None	Russia Nicaragua Venezuela Nauru
Withdrawn recognition from UN member states	Tuvalu Vanuatu	None	Tuvalu
Currency	Russian Ruble	Armenian Dram	Russian Ruble
Products	Fruit Tourism Wine Nuts	Copper and gold mining, Agriculture, Alcohol (Wine, Vodka, Cognac)	Subsistence and heavily subsidised economy

* Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh had a territory of about 4,400 km². Since the war in the early 1990s, however, Armenian forces control about 11,500 km² of territory that is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, including most of Nagorno-Karabakh.

** The demographics of unrecognised states are often contested. In particular, the ethnic balance within Abkhazia is hotly debated, and the actual number of inhabitants in each of these territories may be significantly lower than local population statistics suggest due to long-term or seasonal migration. Figures based on census carried in Abkhazia (2011) and South Ossetia (2015). The only post-Soviet census conducted in Nagorno-Karabakh took place in 2005 but the NKR's National Statistical Service provides detailed and regular data regarding the population.

Table 2: Political and Electoral Systems in South Caucasus De Facto States

	Abkhazia	Nagorno-Karabakh	South Ossetia
Political System	Presidential	Presidential	Presidential
Presidential Electoral System	Second Ballot	Second Ballot	Second Ballot
Parliamentary Electoral System	100% majoritarian single-mandate constituencies (35 seats)	Party-list PR (33 seats)*	Party-list PR system with 7% threshold. (34 seats)**
Peaceful transfer of power from incumbent president to rival	Yes	No	Yes
Two term limit for presidents	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender Quota	No	Yes	No
Willingness to join patron state	No	Yes	Yes
Freedom House Ranking	Partly Free	Partly Free	Not Free

* A completely majoritarian system was initially employed but this was changed in 2005 to a system whereby a third of MPs were elected by party list. In 2010, 17 seats were elected by party list and 16 in single mandate districts, while in 2015 only one third of seats were majoritarian and the remainder were elected via party lists.

** Voter turnout must be 50% plus one, and at least two parties must win seats. Otherwise, a repeat election is required four months later.