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Maximilian Ohle

Fortius Quo Fidelius?

Hierarchy and Bargaining in Russia's Relations with Transnistria and Abkhazia since 1991

With a foreword by Andrey Makarychev

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Maximilian Ohle

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Contents

Foreword

This book offers an important comparative analysis of two unrecognized entities, Transnistria and Abkhazia, situated within the field of post-Soviet studies. More broadly, the monograph also engages with ethnopolitics, post-conflict security studies, and rational choice theory. The author examines the two territories that seceded from Moldova and Georgia both as parts of Russia-controlled geopolitical hierarchies and as actors with a degree of agency in their communication and negotiations with Russia. This often-overlooked aspect of post-Soviet geopolitics is important for understanding the kind of hegemony Moscow is building in its relations with smaller neighboring countries and the long-term effects of that hegemony.

The book is an important contribution to a more nuanced understanding of Russia's decades-long policy of supporting secessionist forces in those post-Soviet countries that wish to have stronger relations with the West. Three patterns of Russian transgressions may be identified in this regard: political and military control, occupation, and annexation. In the case of Transnistria, Russia controls this breakaway region politically and militarily, at the same time without denying Moldova's territorial integrity. When it comes to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia occupied them militarily and recognized them as separate states. Finally, during the invasion of Ukraine, Russia both occupied and annexed Crimea and Donbas. These three cases demonstrate an obvious escalatory tendency in Russia's imperial strategy of weakening and subjugating its neighbors who are unhappy with their dependencies on Moscow.

The creation and sponsoring of the so-called "de facto states" are a key component of Russia's intentional subversion of the post-Cold War international order, which reached its peak in the current war against Ukraine. Apart from the unlawful annexation of four Ukrainian regions, the war has raised the strategic importance of Transnistria for Russia. These developments remind us that reshap-

ing political loyalty is an important component of Moscow's strategy of constructing identities of separatist territories as victimized communities and objects of patronized supervision regardless of national borders. This makes the stories of Transnistria and Abkhazia part of a broader picture of Russia's claim for its sphere of influence under the guise of the alleged "special rights" in the post-Soviet region and "protection of compatriots." It is against this background that Russia moved step by step toward the war against Ukraine as a key component of its overall strategy of fundamentally challenging the post-Cold War security order through creating insecurities that primarily affect neighboring countries seeking stronger association with Europe. So far, Russia appears to have achieved more in the case of Georgia, whose government has digressed from pro-European policies and seeks better relations with the Kremlin, while Moldova continues its EU membership negotiations.

These geopolitical contexts are key to understanding "de facto states" as part of Russia's neo-imperial strategy in the so-called "near abroad." At the same time, as Maximilian Ohle shows in this book, this strategy has its flip side—in some areas Transnistria and Abkhazia have a certain potential to make their voices heard and bargain with Moscow, even on mostly nonpolitical issues. This underside of Russia's hegemony undoubtedly deserves attention and can serve as an important argument in applying the patron-client research framework for studying post-Soviet regionalism.

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September 2025

1 Introduction

On April 25, 2022, two months after Russia launched its full-fledged military invasion of Ukraine, Transnistrian authorities announced that the headquarters of the Ministry of State Security and a military airport in Tiraspol were attacked (Novaia Gazeta, 2022). Three similar instances occurred over the next few days. The Grigoriopol transmitter in Maiac (April 26), the Cobasna ammunition depot (April 27), and an abandoned airport in Vărăncău (May 6) were targeted, but no casualties were reported (Novosti Pridnestrov'ia, 2022; Radio Free Europe, 2022; Gulca, 2022). President Vadim Krasnoselski declared the state of emergency in response to what he framed as "terrorist attacks" (Pridnestrov'e, 2022). While calling on Moldova not to give in to provocations, he also stated that "[a]s the first findings of the urgent operational investigative measures showed, the attacks could be traced back to Ukraine. […] I assume that the perpetrators having staged the attacks aimed to drag Transnistria into the conflict [i.e., the war in Ukraine]" (TASS, 2022b). Likewise, Russian authorities, such as Vladimir Dzhabarov, the vice chairman of the committee on foreign relations of the Federation Council, assumed that Ukraine was behind the attacks without referring to any evidence (Sheikina, 2022). Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko also underlined that "certain forces" intensified the tensions in Southeast Europe, although Russia would like to avoid any scenario requiring intervention on behalf of Transnistria (TASS, 2022c; Vasilyeva, 2022). Ukraine, however, denied any involvement and instead accused Russia of conducting a false flag operation (Baumgardner, 2022; Moldpres, 2022).

Interestingly, though, nothing remarkable happened in the aftermath. Apart from the investigations, there was no other significant response from the Transnistrian authorities to the attacks, and Russia too showed an indifferent reaction to the events while arguably expecting that Transnistria would do something. The Ukrainian view that the Kremlin was staging a pretext for Transnistrian involvement was plausible, considering that opening a second front on Ukraine's southwestern flank could have posed an additional

challenge for the Ukrainian army at a time when Russia's invasion had been stalling (Baumgardner, 2022). Underscoring this argument, Rustam Minnekaiev, then major general and acting commander of the Central Military District of the Russian armed forces, openly stated that Russia's prime objective was to seize southern and eastern Ukraine, constituting a land bridge that links Donbas and Crimea with the Black Sea ports and Transnistria, where he claimed, "facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population have also been observed" (quoted in Roth, 2022). Transnistria, however, showed no interest in becoming entangled, and despite the initial accusations against Ukraine, President Krasnoselski did not signal that Transnistria would become a belligerent party. Moreover, a self-described "group of patriots" affiliated with the Ministry of State Security of Transnistria submitted a document to the Moldovan newspaper agency AVA, in which they accuse "Russian proxies" of "provocative and destructive actions that could destroy the fragile peace in [Transnistria]" (quoted in AVA, 2022). They named Vitali Razgonov, a major general and advisor to the Transnistrian president, as the chief organizer of the attacks, and eight other Russian and Transnistrian individuals with close links to Russian military and security *apparatchiki* as having provided assistance in the clandestine operation (AVA, 2022). These instances illustrated that while publicly neither endorsing nor condemning Russia's illegal invasion—in contrast to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are staunch supporters—Transnistria was in fact resistant to Russian entanglement, thus rebutting the notions that it would blindly follow what its patron expects it to do.

This phenomenon calls for a reconsideration of conventional notions surrounding the constitution of national sovereignty and the role of states endorsing secessionism on behalf of de facto states. Generally, de facto states are conceived as entities suborned by and obsequious to a more dominant actor that endorses the former's separatist agenda and provides the means of their subsistence (Veenendal, 2017). This book, however, posits that Russia's engagement with Eurasia's de facto states—Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia—is more nuanced and diverse than most literature suggests, even though a distinct power asymmetry is irrefutable.

This notion primarily rests on two pillars: the context of the bilateral relations and the domestic resources that a de facto state can mobilize.

The regional, or even local conditions under which Eurasia's de facto states have been seeking engagement with Russia differ in each case, requiring the Kremlin to consistently recalibrate its foreign policy to the political environment and the changing status quo. Although Russia retains strong leverage, the Kremlin must ensure that Eurasia's Russophile de facto states can preserve their statehood with the available resources and capabilities they need. To do so successfully, Moscow must rationalize what these three de facto states expect and demand and thus consider the extent to which it can distribute its resources proportionately to induce and subsequently preserve the alignment, while calculating the maintenance costs as well. This, in turn, gives Eurasia's de facto states some degree of power in the bargaining processes over desirable and favorable policy outcomes, specifically in terms of security provision, economic development, and Russophile cultural dispositions. Consider, for instance, the Russian troop deployments to Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. They are deployed proportionately to provide security provision befitting the interests of each de facto state, but must also be maintained within Russia's available financial and military resources and accord with the Kremlin's security objectives elsewhere. This, however, may give sufficient room for policy maneuver, as the de facto states are enabled to raise higher bargaining stakes for the sake of their political survival. Accordingly, there are consistent exchanges between Russia and the de facto states, each of which seeks to maximize the dividends of their arrangements. As opposed to the view in parts of the literature that de facto states are mere "puppet regimes" of a sponsoring state, the interactions between these entities reveal a more dynamic engagement than a unidimensional top-down relationship (Bakke et al., 2017).

De facto states may also pursue their own political and economic agendas, which do not necessarily correspond to those of the sponsor state, yet without deviating too far from the latter's core objectives while positioned under its tutelage. This largely depends

on whether they can mobilize sufficient domestic resources and how much space for political maneuver they have, so as not to irritate the sponsor while consolidating other vectors of their foreign policy. These may present tangible alternatives that a de facto state can turn to whenever relations with the sponsor deteriorate. However, engagement with the sponsor and political alternatives are not always mutually exclusive. For instance, the European Union (EU) has already surpassed Russia as Transnistria's largest trading partner, even in the absence of recognition. Although the linkages between Tiraspol and Moscow are still strong (especially in the security and cultural domains), the Transnistrian government and business elites seek favorable prospects for economic gains from trade with the EU. Arguably, for the sake of preserving these economic benefits, they did not endorse Russia's military invasion of Ukraine (as opposed to Abkhazia), recognizing that Transnistria would lose them if it were to become a belligerent party (see Chapter 4).

The following analysis particularly focuses on Russia's bargaining interactions with Transnistria (de facto separated from Moldova in 1992) and Abkhazia (de facto separated from Georgia in 1993). It seeks to analyze the bargaining power capacities of Transnistria and Abkhazia toward Russia in terms of whether and, if so, under what conditions they can contest the existing bargains and how they are able to mobilize sufficient bargaining power resources to achieve more favorable outcomes. As indicated, the two case studies are analogous. Transnistria and Abkhazia are sponsored by Russia to preserve their self-proclaimed national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regime consolidation (Devyatkov, 2017; Hoch and Souleimanov, 2020; Kosienkowski, 2020). Each seeks to claim security provision, the benefits of economic engagement with Russia, and the preservation of their Russophile culture. They have separated from a parent state with a less Kremlin-leaning foreign policy, as Moldova and Georgia each signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU in 1994, which were deepened by the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2005 and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 (Korosteleva, 2012). Likewise, Moldova and Georgia (along with Ukraine and Azerbaijan) formed the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic

Development (GUAM), which the Kremlin sees as a counterbalancing force against Russia and Russophile communities, although the political impact of GUAM is widely assessed as comparatively low (Bakhturidze and Lagutina, 2015). Moreover, Transnistria and Abkhazia are subject to endemic corruption, inefficient governance, lack of a competent workforce, emigration, lack of economic growth, and high rates of unemployment and poverty, despite Russian provisions of humanitarian aid and consistent efforts to enhance economic cooperation.

Simultaneously, Transnistria and Abkhazia differ in terms of geography, domestic capabilities, historical development, identity, demography, societal structures (e.g., language, ethnicity, culture, religion), and the degree to which they are willing to make concessions in a certain policy area. These factors affect the definition of specific national interests, which may show very distinct approaches toward Russia, and, accordingly, influence the bargaining process and outcomes. For example, while Transnistria recurrently reiterates its ambitions to join the Russian Federation, even if that means that it loses all its self-proclaimed sovereignty as the results of the respective referendums on independence indicated, Abkhazia seeks to preserve its sovereignty and does not wish to relinquish it in favor of being a constituent of the Russian Federation. Moreover, although Abkhazia is a firm supporter of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and even accepted the redeployment of Russian troops from the 7th Military Base in Gudauta, Transnistria neither condemned nor endorsed it, despite Russia's apparent attempts to entangle Tiraspol in its war against Ukraine. These instances demonstrate that under certain circumstances, de facto states can conduct their foreign policy autonomously and project some degree of bargaining power to achieve favorable policy outcomes or even defy their patron. Transnistria and especially Abkhazia have managed to successfully resist the Kremlin's policies in some bargaining constellations, framed here as "islands of bargaining power"—indeed without abandoning the Russian hierarchical framework altogether—and subsequently achieved more favorable bargaining outcomes (see Chapters 4 and 5). Islands of bargaining power here encompass specific zones within a given policy area (e.g., security,

economics, or culture), in which subordinates have a bargaining advantage and may better project their bargaining power, while the dominant prevails in the remaining zones. This indicates that in certain constellations, Transnistria and Abkhazia could occupy islands of bargaining power, as the following analysis demonstrates.

South Ossetia, however, is not the subject of this book, although it is often discussed in combination with Abkhazia. The reasons for this decision are manifold. First and foremost, it is devoid of bargaining power in any policy area and lacks any other tangible alternative. Being landlocked and internationally ostracized, Tskhinvali can barely ensure the functioning of its state institutions and public administration, thus relying extensively on Russian support to evade regime failure (German, 2016). Moreover, as in the cases of Transnistria and Abkhazia, the Kremlin has issued security reassurances to Tskhinvali and preserves a strong cultural alignment via the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania in which the Ossetians are recognized as the titular nation, though subordinate to Russian administration. However, Russia is South Ossetia's virtually only trading partner, as its geographic location deprives it of any other alternative and Georgian authorities have been accused of having severely constrained trade activities with South Ossetians along the demarcation lines.

The Republic of Artsakh, more commonly known as Nagorno-Karabakh, is likewise not covered in this book, as Armenia—and not Russia—was recognized as the sponsoring state, although the Kremlin, by extension, as Yerevan's ally due to common membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), influenced the process and outcomes of the conflict resolution (Kopeček, 2017; Vasilyan, 2017). With the de facto government of Nagorno-Karabakh having dissolved its self-proclaimed republic by January 2024, upon the surrender to the Azerbaijani armed forces on September 20, 2023, the analytical framework of this book is no longer applicable.

Accordingly, I pose the following questions as the basis for the empirical analysis. (1) What are the cornerstones of Russia's hierarchical framework, and how do Transnistria and Abkhazia benefit from it against the backdrop of the strong asymmetry? (2) How and

to what extent can Transnistria and Abkhazia achieve the desired bargains through the mobilization of available bargaining power, and what are the limitations of their bargaining power? (3) How do Transnistria and Abkhazia grapple with changes in the political environment, impacting their bargaining power?

Theorizing the multiple engagement channels between Eurasia's de facto states as clients (primarily Transnistria and Abkhazia) and Russia as the sponsor remains an under-researched topic, as a general theory or even a meso-level theory encompassing the bargaining interactions between dominant and subordinate has not been developed. Empirically, there are numerous contributions to contextualizing the dynamics of the conflicts, state-building of de facto states, regime legitimacy, the role of the sponsoring state and the relationship of de facto states with their parent states (inter alia O'Loughlin et al., 1998; Kolossov and O'Loughlin, 1998; Caspersen, 2009, 2012, 2018; Blakkisrud and Kolstø, 2011; Bakke et al. 2014; Berg and Vits, 2018; Dembinska and Merand, 2018). Most of this literature, however, scarcely engages in discussions about grand theories or meso-level theories to outline the interrelations between de facto states as subordinates and the sponsoring state as the dominant. The models and concepts used are rather designed to illustrate this phenomenon on a micro-level without any reference to the broader implications, despite their case-specific relevance. This research gap presents the main motivation of this book, seeking to connect both the theoretical and empirical domains by proposing a model on the meso-level that illustrates the specific bargaining interactions of the actors covered in the case studies and utilizes Transnistria and Abkhazia as case studies to analyze and compare the case-specific implications.

1.1 Contextualizing the Relationships between Patron and De Facto States: The Cases of Transnistria and Abkhazia in Russian Foreign Policy

Most literature views Russia's external involvement as an attempt to reinforce its leverage in the post-Soviet space (Trenin, 2001). Russia's great power ambitions not only cover the engagement with sovereign nation-states, which acknowledge the Kremlin's authority to a varying degree, but also most Eurasian de facto states, including Transnistria and Abkhazia. Given that these de facto states have seceded from states with a less Kremlin-leaning foreign policy (Moldova, Georgia), they are seen by many scholars and policymakers alike as appendages to aid Russia's resurging power projection in its "near abroad" (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*). "Near abroad" is a Russian foreign policy concept, framing the states of the former Soviet Union as Moscow's sphere of privileged interests to legitimize Russia's preponderance (Trenin, 2009; Zhao, 2021). Through this viewpoint, Russia has interfered in Moldova and Georgia by exploiting the domestic conflicts through support for the secessionist movements. This behavior may be seen as a sanctioning and disciplinary measure, in order to reinduce alignment or to punish a move toward westward integration into the EU, political objectives described in Moldovan and Georgian foreign policies.

As such, Russia's role in resolving the conflicts in Transnistria on the one hand and Abkhazia on the other reflects the impasse within Moscow's contemporary relations with Chisinau and Tbilisi. Moldova has been oscillating between the West and Russia, so that the non-integration of Transnistria into Chisinau's constitutional order functions as a leverage factor, thus obstructing Moldova's alignment with the West (March and Herd, 2006; Hagemann, 2013; Kennedy, 2016; Nizhnikau, 2016; Cantir and Kennedy, 2015). Georgia, too, has made incremental steps toward EU and NATO alignment since the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 under the Saakashvili administration, although after the "Georgian Dream" (*kartuli otsneba*) under Honorary Chairman

Bidzina Ivanishvili came to power in 2012, a gradual rapprochement with Russia has become tangible (Broers, 2008; Cheterian, 2008; Mitchell, 2009; Siroky, 2016; Fix et al., 2019; Sauer, 2024). Accordingly, I first evaluate conceptual contributions related to secessionism, hierarchical modeling, and bargaining to identify gaps in the existing research; and second, grapple with the contextual settings of Russia's relations with Transnistria and Abkhazia to legitimize the added conceptual and empirical value that this book seeks to provide.

1.1.1 Secession, External Patronage and Hierarchical Modeling

Secession is not limited to states and territories of the former Soviet Union, such as Russia, Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan, but is also observable in other cases where secessionist minorities and their respective parent states display conflict potential. Notable examples include China (Taiwan), Cyprus (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus), Somalia (Somaliland), and Serbia (Kosovo) (Kibble, 2001; Kedouri, 2005; Kostovicova, 2005). A state seeking secession or having already achieved de facto statehood, however, often remains internationally disputed. Most or in some cases even all UN member states do not grant recognition, implying a wide variation of acceptance of de facto states. In practice, UN membership, wrongly seen as the principal parameter of statehood, does little to indicate whether UN members accept an entity into the international society of states through recognition (Renshon, 2017). However, de facto states across the globe, which operate beyond the UN architecture and its international organizations, have proven that they can achieve and preserve statehood.

As such, what factors make de facto states a state? Most notably, the Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States laid down four principles of what constitutes a state ("confirmed statehood"): (1) a permanent, yet not necessarily distinct population, even though the distinctiveness of the prevailing culture in a de facto state may play a major role in its disputes with the parent state; (2) a territory, which in almost all instances is heavily con-

tested between the de facto state and its parent state; (3) a government, which is likewise not recognized by the parent state, albeit wielding effective control over the territory it has claimed; and (4) the capacity to establish relations with other—fully recognized—states or international institutions (Geldenhuys, 2009: 8–14). Since 1991, albeit exposing different origins, Eurasia's de facto states have been able to preserve their sovereignty and arguably fulfill the first three criteria of statehood while facing international non-recognition (Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh) or extensive ostracization by the international society (Abkhazia, South Ossetia). Transnistria via the Association Agreement that Moldova signed with the EU, and Abkhazia via its diaspora in Turkey, the Middle East, and those states recognizing it, have even successfully managed to establish links beyond their patron. Nevertheless, Russia retains a dominant position in their foreign policy discourse, cementing the divisions between the de facto states and their respective parent state and consolidating the Kremlin's leverage over these entities.

The long survival of Eurasia's de facto states showed the complexity of secessionism and protracted territorial disputes in the post-Soviet space, framed by Relitz as the "stabilization dilemma," as each de facto state preserves the operability of its political institutions while the international community is unable or arguably unwilling to resolve the disputes (Relitz, 2019). Given their significance, this raises questions as to how secessions can be captured conceptually, how secessionists operate under certain conditions to achieve statehood and, if involved, how external patrons endorsing secessionism impact such dynamics. Bartkus illustrates a general dynamic, defining secession as "an instance of political disintegration, wherein political actors of one or more sub-systems withdraw their loyalties from the jurisdictional center to focus them on a center of their own" (Bartkus, 2004: 9). The condition that portends the critical moment of secession, referred to as "secession crisis," is conceptualized as an occurrence "when the leaders representing a territorially concentrated and distinct community within a larger state translate discontent into demands for secession, and possess the power, either through sufficiently strong internal community mo-

bilization or through the use of force, to compel the central government to react to those demands" (Bartkus, 2004: 10). In the case of Eurasia's de facto states, their secession crisis was marked by nationalist sentiments during the Gorbachev era until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which triggered various conflicts over national identity, territorial sovereignty, and the right to self-determination. Transnistria (1992) and Abkhazia (1992–1993) fought their own violent struggles for independence when the secessionist leaders, Igor Smirnov and Vladislav Ardzinba, mobilized and agitated for secession from Moldova and Georgia, respectively (King, 1994/95: 110; Souleimanov, 2013: 126, 159).

Bartkus (2004) also examines the evaluation of the benefits of membership (economic, security, and social benefits provided by the parent state) and the costs to secede from the parent state. She argues that the decision to engage in secessionism is embedded in a rational choice pattern, despite the emotional, affective, and at times erratic rhetoric that secessionist leaders display as a means of agitation. Rational choice is employed by entities seeking secession to carefully consider if the costs of secession are worth incurring, or whether they should remain with the parent states, if possible, under a legal framework to resolve the conflict, with a wider degree of political autonomy (Bartkus, 2004). Accordingly, secessions occur at opportune moments when their costs are comparatively low (Bartkus, 2004: 145). Various factors are therefore considered to ensure the success of secession. While state opposition with the prospects of violent repression is common, secessionists may embrace a domestic crisis to bid for independence, given that the authorities of the parent state are distracted and depending on the magnitude of the crisis, police and military units are dispersed across the state to resolve it. The Russian Revolution in 1917 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 exemplify such a scenario when various constituents seized the momentum to claim independence from the central government (Read, 1996; Pearson, 1998).

Likewise, foreign intervention may constitute an opportunity for secessionism, especially when the secessionists are supported by an external patron (Bartkus, 2004: 145). Bartkus notes that "foreign patronage is often an essential element for success in creating

a sovereign state through secession, even though the likely attraction of external assistance may not be the decisive variable in the original secession to secede" (Bartkus, 2004: 154). This suggests that although the patron is not the trigger for secession, it does provide crucial commitments to ensuring the consolidation of the secessionist entity and its survival in the international system. Patrons commonly endorse their clients through material and immaterial provisions that increase the capabilities of the secessionists to repel the parent state that might not otherwise have been possible due to a lack of sufficient resources. Russia, for instance, supported Transnistria in a military confrontation against Moldova in 1992, while Armenia provided support for Nagorno-Karabakh during the wars against Azerbaijan (Kopeček, 2017; Rogstad, 2018). Beyond the post-Soviet space, Turkey (in the case of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus) and India, whose support tipped the balance in favor of Bangladesh during the Liberation War against Pakistan in 1971, similarly underline the significance of foreign intervention in favor of secessionist movements (Bartkus, 2004: 154–158).

Herein, Siroky identifies a rational choice pattern in the patron's strategy toward secessionist movements to evaluate the costs and benefits of sponsoring secessionism. He specifically outlines "why they take sides when they do and how these external factors shape variation in the incidence of secessionist war" (Siroky, 2016: 65). Utilizing the case of Georgia and Russia's intervention on behalf of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he contends that "when regional elites possess significant local control in an area that is contiguous with the potential sponsor, external support is more feasible, more likely to be effective and more likely to be offered to the minority" (Siroky, 2016: 65). Put specifically, "when the sponsoring state [e.g., Russia] is stronger than the host state [e.g., Georgia], and when the minority nation [e.g., the Abkhaz and Ossetians] is relatively strong vis-à-vis the host state at the local level, then the expected cost is lower for the external sponsor," reconnecting this tenet to the argument of how much local control the minority nation exercises (Siroky, 2016: 66). For Heraclides, too, patrons rationally assess the costs of endorsing secessionist movements. He assumes that "(a) states that end up supporting secessionist movements do

so […] for economic, political, and other instrumental motives […]. They rarely if ever do so for affective reasons, such as ideological, ethnic, or religious affinity […]. (b) High-level material support, particularly of the kind that can sustain an armed struggle (funds, arms, training, and the like), is initiated only if there are obvious gains to be made" (Heraclides, 1990: 343).

What Bartkus, Siroky, and Heraclides neglect, however, is the condition when de facto states are bound to their patrons via identity and/or affectivity. While Russian foreign policy, specifically when directed toward the post-Soviet space, is widely regarded as revisionist and reduced to rationalist and instrumentalist motives, affectivity does play a major role in secessionist conflicts, involving Russophile communities. This primarily involves Transnistria as well as the "Lugansk People's Republic" (LNR; *Luganskaia narodnaia respublika*) and the "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR; *Donetskaia narodnaia respublika*) in eastern Ukraine. These entities display strong affinities with the *Russkii mir* ("Russian World"), an imagined community composed of a common (Russophile) identity and shared values, history, memory, and traditions, with Russia recognized as the civilizational center (Hudson, 2019). As such, specifically Russian-speaking communities across the post-Soviet space are susceptible to the articulation of the idea of a transnational common identity, the defense of which has been deeply entrenched in the political cultures and emotions of its carriers and which they seek to impose on societies seeking to move away from the *Russkii mir*, such as Ukraine and Moldova (King, 2000; Cojocaru, 2006; Feklyunina, 2016; Baidaus, 2018; Pop-Eleches and Robertson, 2018). Abkhazia and South Ossetia, albeit widely regarded as victims of Russian imperialism during the Caucasian Wars, also reveal Russophile and affective motives as a result of the wars (1992–1993; 2008) and multiple violent clashes with Georgia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia's discursive belonging and emotional attachment to the *Russkii mir* are therefore determined not only by common history but also by resentments toward Georgia in defense of their self-proclaimed "territorial integrity" and "national sovereignty" (Clogg, 2008; Skakov, 2011; Ambrosio and Lange, 2016; Gerrits and Bader, 2016).

Territorial integrity and sovereignty reinforce identity politics, inducing affectivity of de facto states to their patron. According to Souleimanov, "a given territory's value was largely *symbolic* and emotion-laden. Thus, symbols and ethnic myths evoked by intellectuals—and ruthlessly utilized by politicians—played an enormous role in mobilizing ethnic communities into active conflict" (Souleimanov, 2013: 175). This, too, is a common theme among Eurasia's de facto states, with each seeking to protect their territory by any means necessary with the support of their patron. Nagorno-Karabakh here exemplifies the significance of territory. Armenia had a long-standing territorial dispute with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which Yerevan sees as historically Armenian territory, incurring two wars and enduring low-level insurgencies until the collapse of the de facto government of Nagorno-Karabakh in the wake of Baku's military offensive in September 2023 (De Waal, 2003; Askerov and Ibadogholu, 2023). The Russian-sponsored de facto states reveal a more ambivalent posture. Transnistria (2006) and South Ossetia (1991; 2006) seek unification with the Russian Federation via a referendum, which would result in the conferral of territory to Russian authorities, yet the Kremlin quashed the results of each referendum (Istomin and Bolgova, 2016: 183; Toal, 2008: 680; German, 2016: 165).

On the contrary, as the prevailing view of scholars and prominent Abkhaz decision-makers emphasizes, Abkhazia does not wish to become a constituent of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, upon approval it does incur transgressions of its territorial sovereignty if the Abkhaz government recognizes an added value for its own security interests—e.g., Russian troop deployments over which Abkhaz authorities wield limited command and the establishment of the 7th military base in Gudauta, without which Abkhazia would be unable to provide security provision for its own, specifically along the maritime and land borders. Apart from such concessions, Abkhazia is reluctant to provide its territory for other purposes, as the prohibition of property acquisitions for persons who do not have Abkhaz citizenship and the public debates about controversial investment agreements with Russia highlight (Relitz,

2016: 105). These variations between Transnistria and Abkhazia insinuate that Russia, as their patron, is tasked with readapting its strategy in accordance with what they need and demand in exchange for compliance.

Although widely neglected in the scholarly debates of secessionism, external patronage inevitably leads to a hierarchical architecture, constituting a crucial variable to understand the interdependence between patron, denoted as "the dominant," and client, designated as "the subordinate," following Lake's terminology (Lake, 2007, 2009a). Lake challenges the conventional notions of hierarchy encompassing hegemonic stability that refer to hierarchical top-down structures, within which the subordinated entities do not have sufficient space for political maneuver or no space at all (Lake, 2009a; Clark, 2009). Through the lens of Lake's hierarchy conception, the interrelations between a dominant entity and one or multiple subordinated entities reveal certain bargaining mechanisms, which are based on a rational choice pattern. The subordinate confers a certain degree of sovereignty upon a dominant, which in turn supplies a political order, rebutting the Vattelian argument that sovereignty is indivisible (De Vattel, 1844). The indivisibility of (national) sovereignty, most famously captured in the UN Charter, indicates that, as Hans Morgenthau (1948b: 350) notes, "sovereignty over the same territory cannot reside simultaneously in two different authorities," indicating the state itself wields full sovereignty over the territory it controls and does not share it with any other entity. However, in practice, the national sovereignty of particularly weaker states is constrained when it has made or must make concessions, benefiting a more powerful state or an international organization, of which it has obtained membership (Renshon, 2017). According to Lake (2009a: 44), the hierarchical framework is manifested in a social contract, which the dominant and the subordinate must consistently renegotiate. Lake's understanding of a social contract is based on Hobbes's concept of the escape from the state of nature, as in order to avoid descending into anarchy, authority is conferred upon a supreme authority (*Leviathan*), producing an order in exchange for obedience (Hobbes, 2003). Lake, how-

ever, reinvents the term "social contract," applying it to state relationships rather than individuals, which are based on relational authority. Herein, sovereignty is not indivisible, as states, when seeking to escape from anarchy, may voluntarily decide, in coordination with the dominant, to what extent they are willing to confer national sovereignty on the dominant and in what policy areas they do so (Lake, 2009a:3–4). According to Lake (2009a), the social contract stipulates that the dominant has sufficient authority to make the subordinate comply with the former's rules. This political order must generate sufficient net benefits for both entities, thus offsetting the subordinate's authority transfer to the dominant and ensuring the legitimacy of the social contract. This model conceives anarchy and hierarchy as two poles of a continuum wherein states construct different hierarchical designs with a varying degree of authority *vis-à-vis* one another (Parent and Erikson, 2009: 135–137).

1.1.2 The Significance of Bargaining in Russia's Strategy toward Post-Soviet Secessionist Movements

The bargaining interactions between the sponsoring state and secessionist entities have been so far marginally covered in the existing literature, thus presenting a significant research gap. Considering the prevailing view, secessionist entities are conceived as mere puppets of the sponsor that provides external support based on a rational assessment of economic, political, and other instrumental considerations (Heraclides, 1990: 343). These notions highlight a top-down approach, given the vast power asymmetries and the capabilities of the sponsor to exert influence over the secessionists, befitting its interests. However, such notions neglect that secessionists, too, have agency and can similarly influence the sponsor, depending on the available power resources (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2017: 506). While the sponsor, indeed, gains leverage through the endorsements of a secessionist movement, it simultaneously needs to maintain its influence over the secessionists by offering certain incentives and benefits. Here, the agents rationalizing foreign policymaking and bargaining are either the leaders ("presidents") of the de facto states, actors operating under the aegis of ministries, or

influential policy advisors with a low public profile. While Transnistria and Abkhazia display a high level of activity and seek to maximize the dividends of engagement with Russia, the existing bargains that Russia is offering must induce sufficient satisfaction to ensure the durability of the hierarchical frameworks. This constellation constitutes a setting for consistent bargaining interactions between patron and de facto states, with which this book seeks to grapple to offer new conceptual innovations encompassing hierarchy, power asymmetries, and bargaining.

This chimes well with Veenendaal's patron-client model, which characterizes the bilateral relationship as being (1) reciprocal in terms of linkages, i.e. "each of the two players has something to offer that the other player desires"; (2) asymmetric, which suggests a top-down *modus operandi*; (3) based on compliance of the client with the demands and interests of the patron; and (4) affective, which generates a form of loyalty for the patron (or dominant), thus enhancing the linkages and bargaining interactions (Veenendaal, 2017: 565). The fourth aspect, however, must be critically evaluated, as loyalty to the patron is not necessarily bound to emotional or affective attachment but may also be a consequence of having rationally calculated the costs and benefits of the commitment. Moreover, Shoemaker and Spanier describe patron-client constellations as "bargaining relationships in which each state tries to extract from the other valuable concessions at minimum cost" (Shoemaker and Spanier, 1984: 24). Provided that the patron can supply a political order, which generates sufficient net benefits for the client, the latter would rather incline toward compliance instead of violating the loyalty, as it would otherwise face disciplinary measures or even ejection from the political order (Ohle et al., 2020: 90). Although Russia and the Kremlin-endorsed de facto states exemplify such a constellation, they do reveal certain case-specific variations that may not undermine the patron-client model altogether but require conceptual and theoretical adaptations to capture the specific mechanics of Russia's hierarchical architecture more adequately. Accordingly, I will provide a critical reconsideration of existing contributions to Russia's relationships with Transnistria and Abkhazia,

highlighting the parallels and variations, yet also illustrating where this book can close relevant gaps in contemporary research.

1.1.2.1 Russia's Relationship with Transnistria: Framing the Context of Geopolitics, Identity and Hierarchical Alignment

Russia's relationship with Transnistria is widely defined by its geopolitical objectives in Moldova, which encompass Russian troop deployments, the maintenance of the military base in Cobasna, the protection of what the Kremlin defines as "Russian-speaking communities" and influence over the Moldovan civil society and policy outcomes (Lynch, 2000: 83–84). Accordingly, many (especially pro-Western) Moldovan politicians who hold hawkish views of Russian foreign policy toward the region, with some seeing Transnistria as an occupied territory, and the prevailing scholarly view argue that Moscow's support for Transnistria is barely driven by revisionist and geopolitical motives (Devyatkov, 2012; Rogstad, 2018). For instance, Kosienkowski argues that "as a Russian client, [Transnistria] affords Russia certain advantages over its Western adversaries in the competition for influence in two former Soviet republics: mainly in Moldova, Transnistria's parent state, but also in Ukraine, Transnistria's second neighbor" (Kosienkowski, 2020: 184). This argument indicates Russia's utilization of Tiraspol as an instrument to maintain Russian power projection in Southeast Europe and to restrain potential Western expansionism, specifically after Moldova's rapprochement with the EU following the failure of the Kozak Memorandum 2003 and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Kosienkowski, 2020; Johansson, 2006: 510). Likewise, Devyatkov argues that although Russia has provided significant political and financial contributions to sustaining the de facto regime in Transnistria, the Kremlin is focused on "buying" Transnistrian loyalty, as a consolidated pro-Russian de facto state in Tiraspol would protract the conflict settlement process and impede Moldova's integration into the EU (Devyatkov, 2014). In other words, "obstructing the Europeanization of Moldova is here simply a means of defending Transnistria" (Devyatkov, 2014: 8).

Such assessments suggest that Transnistria's role is relegated to being an obsequious and loyal pro-Russian de facto state that

ought to strengthen Moscow's position in the wider Russian–Moldovan relations. As such, Rogstad argues that Russia has been seeking leverage over the whole of Moldova rather than being limited to Transnistria (Rogstad, 2018). He notes that "Russia's Moldova policy over time is one of relative disinterest in Transnistria itself […] as well as of reactive policy-making and frequently unsuccessful attempts to assert Russian control and to break through local intransigence and power configurations" (Rogstad, 2018: 50). Such notions correspond to what I framed elsewhere as "a *divide et impera* strategy to preserve [Russian] influence," in which Transnistria is used as a bargaining chip *vis-à-vis* the Moldovan government, as without a full restoration of Moldova's territorial integrity and sufficient political, economic, and social resilience, Moldova would be constantly vulnerable to Russian pressures (Ohle, 2023: 118). Devyatkov adds that Russian policy toward Moldova is also determined by the attempts to restrain NATO expansion, although Chisinau declared its permanent military neutrality, enshrined in Article 11 of the Moldovan constitution (Devyatkov, 2012; Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2022a).

However, Russian attempts to gain control over Moldova have tremendously backfired since Putin's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, coupled with an increasingly confrontational rhetoric toward Chisinau that in turn encouraged the pro-European Moldovan government under Maia Sandu to seek even closer engagement with the EU (Ohle, 2023). Simultaneously, Romania adopted a law, enabling the President to order, at the proposal of the Prime Minister, an intervention abroad in coordination with its strategic partners to protect Romanian citizens in danger, seemingly an implicit reference to Moldova where approximately one million people hold Romanian citizenship (Nescutu, 2024). This may yet reinforce Russian encroachments against Moldova, under the banner of "protecting Russian and Russian-speaking citizens against Romanian aggression," intensifying the geopolitical tensions in the region. The Kremlin has traditionally been displaying a strongly entrenched Romanophobia, which can be traced back at least until the First World War when Moldova first had gained in-

dependence from the Russian Empire but soon reunited with Romania. As Devyatkov notes, Russia "perceives Romanization and Euro-integration mostly as factors contributing to Moldova's partnership with NATO. […] Bucharest also promulgates an image of Moldova as 'Romanian soil'—allegedly prevented from state formation first by the Russian Empire, then by the Soviet Union" (Devyatkov, 2012: 55).

Accordingly, the relationship between Russia and Transnistria is reflective of an inherently hierarchical character. While Crandall argues that the "Transnistrian effect" rather impacts the hierarchical relationship between Russia and Moldova, which since the Sandu administration came to power in December 2020, has been on the brink of detachment, Transnistria has long been integrated into the Russian security, economic, and cultural hierarchy without transmitting any signals of desertion to a different political order (Crandall, 2012). Accordingly, Devyatkov (2017) concludes that Russia and Transnistria maintain an active patron-client relationship, which is based on the reciprocal exchange of benefits. Likewise, Kosienkowski characterizes the Russian–Transnistrian relationship as composed of a patron and a client, with each seeking to benefit from each other. While Tiraspol is installed as an aider of the Kremlin's geopolitical agenda by functioning as a node of influence to permeate Russian influence into the Moldovan and, partly, the Ukrainian societies, it also receives sufficient security reassurances and financial aid from Moscow, supporting the functioning of Transnistria's institutions (Kosienkowski, 2020: 185–192).

Simultaneously, the Russian–Transnistrian hierarchy is not entirely devoid of disagreements, requiring consistent efforts to renegotiate the existing bargains in terms of redistribution of the net benefits as well as the conditions of compliance. Kosienkowski characterizes such a constellation as a "mutually valued relationship marked by tensions," highlighting that de facto states are not always obsequious and submissive as commonly illustrated in the traditional literature (Kosienkowski, 2020: 196). For example, a notable instance includes Transnistria's resistance to becoming entangled in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, considering that, as I argue elsewhere, "if the separatist Transnistrian regime were to become a