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Biting the hand that feeds them? Abkhazia–Russia client–patron relations

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the post-Soviet de facto state of Abkhazia, and its relationship to its main patron, Russia. All patron–client nexuses are marked by a high degree of asymmetrical power – especially with de facto states, which depend upon the patron for their very survival. Thus, it is surprising to see how de facto client states repeatedly show that they are both willing and able to defy the wishes of their patrons and pursue their own agendas instead. Moreover, the patron may be willing to tolerate such rebelliousness. What can explain such “disobedient” behavior? I examine three contentious aspects of Russian–Abkhazian relations: the process leading up to the signing of an extended bilateral agreement in 2014; the tussles over how to fight crime in Abkhazia; and acrimony over Abkhazia’s reluctance to allow Russians to buy property in their country, despite massive pressure from Russian authorities.

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Clearly, [the Russians] are trying to tell us this: dear Abkhazians, in your foreign and domestic policy you will behave as we tell you or else we will bend you into the likeness of a goat horn. … But those who think that they can lead Abkhazia by the hand are making a very big mistake. After all, how could it be possible to turn a people who have lived and fought for independence for so many years into novices?

– Major General Aslan Kobakhiya, a Hero of Abkhazia; member of the Abkhazian Parliament, 2013. (Kobakhiya 2013)

At this stage the Abkhazian authorities hardly have the right to dictate to Russia their conditions or decide everything without her agreement … After all, this is Russian money.

Konstantin Zatulin, Russian politician with a keen interest in Abkhazian affairs. (Zatulin 2011, 359)

De facto states are states that have failed to win international recognition or are recognized by only a handful of other states. They are usually small, and they are few; even so, they play critical and contentious roles in international politics. Since the end of the Cold War, de facto states have been involved in a large number of violent conflicts, conflicts that have resulted in their establishment, change of status – or elimination (Pegg 1998; Lynch 2004; Kolstø 2006; Caspersen and Stansfield 2011; Caspersen 2012).

The most important aspect of de facto state politics today, I hold, is the relationship with the “patron state” – the state that sustains a de facto one financially and gives it military security. The patron state provides the essential lifeline: de facto states that have lacked such a patron have proved short-lived.1 Denied the legitimacy that even the weakest and most dysfunctional recognized states enjoy, they continually risk being recaptured by the parent states from which they have seceded, as happened to Republika Srpska Krajina in Croatia in 2005 and Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka in
2009. They therefore need a strong protector – a patron state – that can dampen the reconquista aspirations of the parent state.

Given this strong dependency, it is surprising that de facto client states repeatedly show themselves both willing and able to defy the wishes of their patrons and pursue their own agendas instead. What can explain such a counterintuitive behavior? Trying to find some answers to how this has been possible, I focus on one highly puzzling case – Russian–Abkhazian relations, a case that involves particularly strong unwillingness on the part of the client state to defer to the wishes of its sole protector and sustainer.

Directly and indirectly, Abkhazia’s state budget is underwritten by Russian subventions, to the tune of many billion rubles each year.² In return, the Russians expect, if not gratitude, then at least compliance and a certain droit de regard in “their” client state, but often feel that this is not forthcoming. Here I examine three contentious aspects of Russian–Abkhazian relations: the process leading up to the signing of an extended bilateral agreement in 2014; the tussles over how to fight crime in Abkhazia; and mutual recriminations over Abkhazia’s reluctance to allow Russians to buy property in Abkhazia, or reclaim property they had owned there but abandoned during the 1992/93 war of secession from Georgia. In the tug-of-war over the bilateral agreement from 2014, the Abkhazian side was able to put its imprint on the final text to a larger degree than the Russian negotiation partner. Russian attempts to establish tight coordination between the Russian and Abkhazian ministries of internal affairs in order to combat rising crime levels have met fierce resistance. Third, despite massive pressure from Russian authorities, the media, and businesspeople for opening up the Abkhazian real estate market to Russian buyers, they are still barred from it.

Two possible circumstances may help to explain why Abkhazians seem particularly ready to confront their patron. First, vivid historic memories of wrongs committed against Abkhazians in the past, also by the Russian state, have engendered a “survivalist syndrome” and fears of extinction among the population. Second, as a small state with an easily aroused public, Abkhazia has a high degree of pluralistic but also potentially rowdy political culture, and local powerholders must constantly remain attentive to the wishes of the “parliament of the street.” Abkhazian politicians can utilize this pressure from below as a lever in dealings with the patron: they are engaged in a two-level game – bilaterally, client state versus patron state; domestically, elites versus the masses. The politicians cannot afford to be seen as being “soft on the patron,” and must adopt an inflexible position in confrontations with the benefactor.

Patron-client relations in international politics, de facto states in particular

The concept of patron–client relationships was introduced into social science by historians studying the socio-political structures of ancient Rome; it was later taken up by anthropologists to explain certain interpersonal, non-kinship dependencies in pre-modern societies. The concept has also found application in the study of interstate relations, especially under conditions of superpower competition.

Much of the literature on interstate patron–client nexuses was written during the Cold War, and reflected Cold War realities. Such arrangements were numerous on both sides of the Iron Curtain – for instance, USA/Israel, and China/Albania prior to 1978. The client state may be weak (Albania) or strong (Israel) in absolute terms, but the dyad is always characterized by a significant power gap between patron and client. Even so, as shown by Israeli–US relations also before the Netanyahu–Obama standoff, client states can, under certain circumstances, take on world powers – and get away with it (see e.g. Rodman 1997).

Cold War patron–client relationships were a part of the global competition between the two superpowers, the USSR and the USA, with each trying to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the other by capturing as many satellite states as possible, as well as by “stealing” clients from the rival (Shoemaker and Spanier 1984). Even if the power differentials between patron and client were great, even enormous, in terms of size, population, military might, and GNP, Shoemaker and Spanier
(1984, 24) maintain that they should be described not in terms of dictates/obedience but as fundamentally “bargaining relationships in which each state tries to extract from the other valuable concessions at a minimal cost.”

Maczak (2005) argues that “to leave a client in the lurch” may be risky for the patron’s prestige and chances of winning over new satellites. However, whereas clients during the Cold War could threaten to defect to the other side, there is no competition over patronhood for de facto states. No other states than those that now function as patrons of the world’s de facto states are interested in taking them under their wing. Prestige may still play a role in patrons’ attitudes towards their clients, but the clients’ potential for defection is not part of the equation. Rather, what may be at stake for the patron is its general reputation as a friend to be trusted in case of adversity. This seems to be an important element in explaining, for instance, Russia’s heavy involvement on the regime side in the Syrian war.

In their behavior towards their partner, both patrons and de facto clients may be constrained by assumptions about reactions from the international community, which condemns secession as a breach of international law. This may deter both sides from pursuing a policy of overly deep integration. The de facto state may fear that if it is regarded as a “puppet” of the patron, that might undermine its future prospects of recognition. Even more important are domestic constraints. These can be found both in the patron and the client state but appear especially strong in client-state politics, for two reasons. First, the relationship to the patron is of much greater concern for the populace of the client state. Second, politics in de facto client states is not infrequently more pluralistic and open than in the respective patrons. Active pressure groups in the population weigh in, expressing strong opinions about what they see as an acceptable relationship with the patron – not only through the ballot box but at times through riots and demonstrations. Politicians in de facto states are involved in a two-level nested game: with the patron, and with their own populations. Leaders of de facto states can exploit the constraints placed on them by popular domestic pressure as a resource in their dealings with their patron. Such pressures may narrow the scope for maneuver at the political level in ways that, under certain circumstances, may give politicians a stronger hand in their dealings with the patron.

The de facto states have often not been regarded as foreign policy actors in their own right, but as mere instruments in the hands of their patrons (Souleimanov, Abrahamyan, and Huseyn 2018). And indeed, de facto states are heavily dependent on the support – economic and political – provided by their patrons. The deep asymmetry in the power differential in these dyads militates against their independent agency, or so it would seem. Several authors have described post-Soviet de facto states as “puppets” in the hands of a Moscow puppet-master (Cornell and Starr 2009; Asmus 2010, 4; see also Lynch 2004, 4). However, patron–client relations involving de facto states tend to exhibit varied patterns with regard to the congruence/divergence of policy goals between patron and client, and also when it comes to the patron’s willingness/ability to force the client to toe the line.

De facto states may have priorities that diverge sharply from the interests of their patron. In fact, even the weakest and most resource-strapped de facto states have at some point defied their patron and insisted on pursuing their own agenda. In some cases, observers have maintained that client success in pressurizing its patron to accept its own agendas and preferred polices in the conflict with the parent state has resulted in a “tail wagging the dog” syndrome (see e.g. Socor 2011). In a few instances, leaders of de facto states have even aligned with domestic opponents of their patron-state leaders – as when the leadership of the unrecognized Republic of Transnistria in Moldova, which has Russia as its patron, supported the Moscow rebellion against Boris Yeltsin in October 1993.

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) would not have survived without the military as well as economic support it receives from Turkey (Pegg 1998; Caspersen 2012, 56) – but this has not prevented the citizens of the TRNC from developing a society very different from that of Turkey. While Turkey in recent years has steadily fallen on the Freedom House index on “Freedom in the World,” to 6 points in 2019, the TRNC has consistently over the last decade been rated as “free,” with a score of 2. The independent political course taken by the Turkish Cypriots has not gone down well in Ankara (Isachenko 2012, 146; Alaranta 2015, 2). On several occasions Turkish President Recep...
Tayyip Erdogan has fulminated against the TRNC leadership for their lack of subservience (e.g., Northern Cyprus 2015), but the Turkish Cypriots have not swerved.

In some cases, when patrons have sought to meddle in elections in the de facto states, signaling their clear preference for a specific candidate, this candidate has nevertheless been rejected by the voters (as in Abkhazia in 2004, Transnistria in 2011, and in South Ossetia in 2011 and again in 2017: Kolstø 2020). Sometimes the popular choice in the de facto state has been overturned; at other times, the patron has acquiesced (Ó Beacháin 2015).

As Caspersen (2007, 2012, 59) has pointed out, the Serbian rebel regime in the self-proclaimed Republic Srpska Krajina (RSK) in Croatia (1999–2005) was utterly dependent on material support and manpower from President Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia; even so, the regime repeatedly defied the instructions of the patron. This obstinacy was clearly a factor that led to the downfall of the RSK (Kolstø and Paukovic 2014). This seems to indicate that secessionist leaders can ignore the wishes of their patron only so far – beyond that point, they proceed at their own peril. On the other hand, there is very little love lost between the two secessionist entities in Eastern Ukraine – Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) and Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) – and their patron state, Russia. The Donbas resistance movement has been fiercely critical of Putin, accusing him of betrayal and worse (Sakwa 2015, 164–165; see also Kolstø 2016; Matveeva 2016). Still, the relationship with Russia, their only “friend” in the world, may be severely strained, but is not broken.

Almost by definition, de facto states are more reliant upon their patron than are other client states, because they lack one basic ingredient of sustainability – international recognition. The modal tendency of de facto state patron–client power relations may be assumed to be particularly asymmetrical. If clients challenging their patrons under such conditions are more the rule than the exception, that in a sense puts the case for separate agency of client states to the test. If we can explain such counterintuitive behaviour in de facto states’ relations to their patrons, that may help in understanding patron–client relations in general.

**Brief historical sketch**

The Abkhazians are an autochthonous, partly Orthodox partly Muslim people in the Western Caucasus who came under Russian rule when their land was conquered by tsarist troops in the first half of the 19th century. The region remained restive, however, and after two aborted rebellions, in 1866 and 1877, hundreds of thousands of Abkhazians, all Muslims, amounting to perhaps as much as half of the population, were deported/fl ed to the Ottoman Empire, and the region was finally pacified (Bennigesen and Wimbush 1985, 213–216).

When the USSR was established in 1922, the Abkhazians got their own autonomous Federation subject who briefly enjoyed the status as a Treaty Republic, in affiliation with the Georgian SSR (Zatulin and Anchabadze 1998). In 1931, however, the Abkhazian SSR was subordinated under the Georgian SSR and exposed to massive Georgianization, culturally and demographically. By the end of the Soviet period, Georgians made up the majority of the population in the autonomous republic; ethnic Abkhazians were reduced to 17.8% (Kaiser 1994, 175).

The Abkhazians several times appealed to Moscow to regain their separate status outside Georgia, but within the Soviet Union (Nahaylo and Swoboda 1990, 202–203), to no avail, and during perestroika they unilaterally proclaimed independence. This unleashed a bloody war with Georgia in 1992–1993, which the Abkhazians won. It has often been claimed that Russia was actively involved in the war (see e.g. Lynch 2004, 21; Zürcher 2007, 141) and tipped the balance in the direction of Abkhazian victory. In fact, however, the Kremlin’s position in this conflict remained ambivalent.

In March 1993, in the midst of the ferocious Georgian-Abkhazian war, the Abkhazian parliament appealed to the Russian authorities to be included in the Russian Federation as a federal subject, but were rebuffed. On the contrary, in 1996, as punishment for Abkhazia’s unilateral secession from Georgia, Russia and most other members of the Commonwealth of Independent states (CIS) signed an embargo agreement covering all commercial, financial, and transport connections with Abkhazia
(Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010, 7). After Putin’s ascent to power, Russian implementation of the embargo became increasingly lukewarm, but the country did not officially withdraw from it until spring 2008. Russia can only with great modifications be described as Abkhazia’s “patron state” in this period.

In August 2008 Abkhazia used the Georgian–Russian war over South Ossetia to launch a successful attack on the last territories in the former Abkhazian ASSR that were still under Georgian control. When Russia decided to extend diplomatic recognition to South Ossetia after the war, it did the same with Abkhazia. Only Venezuela, Nicaragua, a few island ministates in the Pacific Ocean and, most recently, Syria have followed suit: for all practical purposes, Russia is Abkhazia’s sole benefactor.

Abkhazian politics since the country achieved de facto independence has been tumultuous. In closely contested elections in 2004 the challenger candidate, Sergei Bagapsh, narrowly beat Raul Khajimba, the chosen successor of the outgoing president, who also was Russia’s favorite (Smolnik 2016, 176–179). With demonstrative backing from Russia, Khajimba refused to concede defeat, leading the country to the brink of civil war (Platonova 2013, 117) with thousands of Bagapsh supporters pouring into the streets to defend the popular choice (Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010, 10–11). At the last minute a face-saving compromise was found that effectively left Bagapsh as the winner. The entire incident was widely regarded as a public relations disaster for Russia (Platonova 2013). Bagapsh was re-elected in 2009, but suddenly died in 2011, and was succeeded by his vice president, Alexander Ankvab, who won the elections two years later. In 2014, however, Ankvab faced massive street demonstrations demanding his resignation; in the end, he caved in and fled to Russia. In the ensuing elections Khajimba managed, on his fourth attempt, to occupy the presidential seat after dubious elections that observers have described as a virtual coup d’état (Ó Beacháin 2017, 4).

The tug-of-war over the bilateral agreement

When Russia granted diplomatic recognition to Abkhazia in 2008, a bilateral agreement “On Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support” was soon signed in Moscow. After some years, however, Moscow felt that this agreement did not deal sufficiently with important aspects of their relationship, and that a new and more detailed treaty was needed (Proekty 2014; Ambrosio and Lange 2016). In Abkhazia, however, there was deep skepticism surrounding such a new agreement, which, it was feared, might be used as a tool for greater integration between the two countries and, in effect, as a step towards Abkhazia’s full subordination.

In September 2014, shortly after having won the Abkhazian presidential elections, Raul Khajimba, reassuring the Russians, in his inaugural speech pledged to work for the signing of a new treaty, before the end of the year, aimed at “deeper integration” (Raul’ Khajimba 2014). However, given the ambivalence of both attraction and distrust in Abkhazian attitudes towards Moscow, it was essential to tread gingerly in this process. In the fall of 2014, political life in Sukhum/i was abuzz with discussions about the new treaty. Already two days before Khajimba’s inauguration, at a roundtable arranged by the Abkhazian Foreign Ministry, severe apprehensions were expressed concerning the possible sell-out of Abkhazian interests. Director of the Sukhum/i-based Center for Strategic Research, the philosopher Oleg Damenia, reminded the audience that in the Soviet period Abkhazian politicians had to travel to Tbilisi to receive their orders, “and then returned home to explain to the people how their republic should develop.” With deep regret he noted, “this is how our leaders have begun to act also today” (Rossiisko-abkhazskie 2014; author’s interview with Oleg Damenia, Sukhum/i, 31 August 2018).

Asked in August 2014 how the new bilateral accord would be written, Abkhazian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Iraklii Khintba emphasized that it would have to be drafted jointly, “with active participation from the Abkhazian side” (Khintba 2014). Thus, the Abkhazians were apparently taken by surprise when Russia in October that year presented a treaty text which they had not been involved in formulating. Perhaps the apprehensions of Oleg Damenia, quoted above, were not
groundless: Moscow would treat its client just as arrogantly as the Georgians in Tbilisi had once done, but the Russian draft was published in the Abkhazian press and exposed to strong criticism in the public as well as in the parliament.

One parliamentarian, Oleg Smyr, remarked that even if the preamble of the draft treaty declared that the sovereignty of Abkhazia would be preserved, the rest of the text made it clear that Russia would “get full control over all spheres of our life” (Polemika 2014). Parliamentary Speaker Valerii Bganba claimed that, with the exception of the preamble, all the articles of the new treaty were unacceptable in its current version:

*We understand that integration with Russia is necessary; we understand that this is our strategic ally. But that doesn’t mean that we have to lose our sovereignty. Therefore, of course, we will chart a course that will indeed strengthen our friendship with the Russian Federation, but at the same time be based on equal rights. Here it is not a matter of big or small state, but simply of two states (Zavodskaya 2014).*

As Russian political scientist Sergei Markedonov (2014) has pointed out, the Russian side had apparently tried to heed Abkhazian sensibilities and concerns already in the original draft of the treaty. For instance, the authors did not insist on a liberalization of the real estate market in Abkhazia that would have allowed Russian investors to buy property there. They also avoided the term “association” in describing the treaty, knowing that it might touch a raw nerve in Sukhum/i (Markedonov 2014). The Abkhazians, however, were not appeased, and sat down to rewrite the text. Instead of integrating the Abkhazian army into Russian military structures, separate Abkhazian armed forces would be retained; only a few, specified units would be allocated to joint Russian–Abkhazian military formations. Abkhazians would be allowed to enlist in the Russian Army, but only in units deployed on Abkhazian territory. Furthermore, the Abkhazians deleted from the text clauses to the effect that their educational and customs standards would have to be brought into conformity with Russian norms. They added new clauses guaranteeing that Abkhazians holding Russian passports would be granted pensions at the same level as pensioners in the Russian Southern Federal District (Bazhanova 2014). Finally, they changed the title of the treaty from “On Alliance and Integration” to “On Alliance and Strategic Partnership” (Ambrosio and Lange 2016).

Having presented their respective positions, the two sides sat down together, and managed to compose a document that was acceptable to both parties. The formulations and the overall tenor of the final version owed something to both drafts, but were generally far closer to the Abkhazian than to the Russian text. It was made clear that the new treaty would supplement, not supplant, the 2008 treaty, and that it would not contradict the Constitution of Abkhazia (Prezident 2014).

While the term “integration” had appeared many times in the Russian draft, it was dropped in the Abkhazian draft and also in the final text that was signed on 24 November 2014 (V Sochi Podpisana). Importantly, Abkhazia successfully negotiated a change in the clause on citizenship, which would now be a one-way process: Russia would simplify the acquisition of Russian citizenship for Abkhazians, whereas Abkhazia would not have to reciprocate (Ambrosio and Lange 2016, 685). Indicatively, the Abkhazian choice of title was retained. However, even after the treaty was signed, there was massive opposition within Abkhazian society (see Dva mitinga 2014). Critics noted that the treaty let the Russian bases enjoy extraterritorial rights, and were to be leased for 49 years for the symbolic sum of only one ruble. They would also receive electricity and other services for the bases “really cheap.”

**Crime in Abkhazia and how to combat it**

Even if a new, solid platform for the bilateral relations between Russia and its client state had now been laid, fresh tensions and disagreements soon erupted. In summer 2015 came a row over the establishment of a joint Russian–Abkhazian “Information and Coordination Center to Combat Organized Crime and Other Kinds of Criminality.” The 2014 bilateral agreement had stipulated that such a center should be established within one year, but preparations dragged on, due to disagreements over its composition and competences. In Sukhum/i it was suspected that the Russians
distrusted the Abkhazians’ ability – or will – to uphold law and order on their territory. Members of the Abkhazian parliament questioned the need for such a center, which, they felt, would encroach on the sovereignty of their state. The model proposed by Russia, with a Center with no less than 400 employees, was in Abkhazia perceived as an attempt to merge the two states’ ministries of the interior, for all practical purposes (Rossii nuzhno 2015).

In July 2015 it seemed as if a compromise that would heed Abkhazian sensibilities was within reach, but the Abkhazian side was still not satisfied. Almost two more years were to pass before an agreement was finally signed, on 18 May 2017. The number of employees had now been reduced to 40, one-tenth the original Russian proposal. In the words of Abkhazian journalist Izida Chania, the Abkhazian side had succeeded in “emasculating” (vykholositi) the center, which in effect had become “meaningless.” Even now, however, resistance was massive among large sectors of the Abkhazian public (Kiarazaa 2017; Zayavlenie 2017). Fifteen members of the Abkhazian parliament signed an appeal to the president to postpone implementation, insisting that several articles would have to be revised (Obrashchenie 2017).

The crux of the matter was the perceived need to safeguard Abkhazian state independence against all possible encroachments – not disagreement on the importance of combatting crime. On the contrary, the opposition criticized the president and the government harshly for letting the country slide into anarchy and lawlessness: “Every day we are bombarded with news about killings, robbery, and mob rule that darken the already difficult situation in the country. The country is returning to the Middle Ages”(Oppozitsiya 2017). While this description might be hyperbolic, this perception was shared by many Russian observers as well. In particular, the Russian media focused on incidents in which Russian citizens suffered molestation or injury. The Moscow yellow-press newspaper Komsomol’skaya Pravda, widely read throughout the entire former Soviet Union, several times sent its special correspondent Vladimir Vorsobin to Abkhazia, and his reporting left the impression that Russians were almost fair game there (Vorsobin 2010, 2017). For instance, in September 2013, the Russian vice-consul in Sukhum/i was shot dead together with his wife, while the suspected killer escaped. On other occasions, Russian businessmen who had invested money in Abkhazia were cheated out of their money by mafia-like methods, thrown into jail, beaten up, even killed. In one notorious case, the person found guilty of having ordered the murder of a Russian businessman and his wife was a member of the Abkhazian parliament (Prigovory 2016). Such incidents formed part of the background for the tug-of-war over the Information and Coordination Center.

The Russian authorities were concerned about the growing lawlessness in Abkhazia – not only because Russian citizens were among the victims, but also because it severely harmed the Abkhazian economy, already heavily subsidized from Moscow. Russian capital was behind nearly 99% of all foreign investments in the small country (International Crisis Group 2010, 6), but accounts of how Russian businessmen were defrauded and maltreated put a damper on willingness to risk money there. Even more important than direct Russian investments for the Abkhazian economy has been the tourist industry. Russians make up the vast majority of all tourists in the de facto republic, and media reports of how they are insulted, robbed, roughed up, and even killed while on vacation in Abkhazia inevitably have a negative effect on the choice of holiday destination. Abkhazia has beautiful scenery, long stretches of beach, and prices affordable to middle-class Russians – but these advantages are offset by accounts of poor service and lack of security.

In July 2017 a Russian family on vacation in Gudauta in Abkhazia was attacked and the father stabbed to death. This incident had severe repercussions in the media (Tret’yakova 2017). Alexander Skakov, a leading Russian expert on Abkhazian politics and society, tried to defuse tensions by claiming that incidents such as the one in Gudauta “happen frequently everywhere” and had been blown out of all proportion in the Russian media (Putin poobeshchal 2017). That may well be correct, but is in a sense beside the point. A strong impression was created among the Russian public that Abkhazia was not safe for vacationing. This image was spread even by the official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where readers were informed that
The level of criminality in Abkhazia is extremely high. Most common are theft (mostly smaller belongings), robbery, hooliganism, and swindle. Theft of money (often also with documents) takes place on beaches, in private apartments, and from parked cars. (Konsul'skii informatsionnyi n.d.)

The 2017 season saw a drastic decline in the numbers of Russian tourists to Abkhazia. Tour operators reported that Russians were canceling tickets for trips already purchased; altogether between 30% to 40% fewer Russians visited Abkhazia that year (Abkhazskii soyuz 2017; Ubiistvo 2017). That pushed the goal of achieving an economy no longer heavily dependent on Russian subsidies and loans even further into the future.

**Economic relations**

In addition to their concerns about lack of security in Abkhazia, Russian businessmen and politicians regularly complain about the poor investment climate (Rossiisko-abkhazskie 2013). For instance, in 2009 the Abkhazian government signed a contract with Rosneft on offshore exploration for oil (Rosneft 2009); but after some years, the Abkhazians began to have second thoughts. In July 2015, when Rosneft had located an estimated reserve of 200 to 220 million tons of crude oil, the Abkhazian authorities, citing ecological concerns, established a commission to examine also already-concluded contracts for oil exploration (Nikita Isaev 2015). Russian experts wondered whether this turnabout was caused by ineptitude or hidden motives, perhaps hopes of getting a better deal by selling to somebody else. As the outspoken Russian economist Nikita Isaev remarked:

> Having received not only substantial support, but even coverage of a large part of the [state] budget [from Russia] – for social payments as well as for investments – Abkhazia nevertheless continues to look in other directions. Abkhazia is currently playing several foreign policy cards at the expense of Russian interests. (Nikita Isaev 2015)

One of the really tough issues in Russian–Abkhazian economic relations, which has created massive annoyance and frustration on both sides, is the real estate question. Russian citizens can invest money in all kinds of businesses in Abkhazia, but are barred from buying land and residential apartments – whereas there are no restrictions on Abkhazian citizens buying property in Russia. Both ordinary Russians and Russian officials complain loudly and frequently about this, and feel that if the Abkhazians are serious about their desire for reciprocity in their mutual relations, they should start by equalizing access to each other’s housing markets (Rossiyane smogut 2010). The Abkhazians, however, argue that during the 1992–1993 war so many buildings were destroyed or made inhabitable that there is a severe shortage of apartments, and they do not want property to be bought up by affluent Russians wishing to use them as summer homes. If the housing market were to be liberalized, prices would increase steeply, especially along the coast, and the often-impoverished local population would not be able to buy (Rossiyane smogut 2010; author’s interviews in Sukhum/i, August 2018). Abkhazian authorities also point out that their country lacks an updated land register (Priobretenie 2015). Finally, the clinching argument for some Abkhazians is that, even if the housing market were opened up to citizens of the Russian Federation only and to no other foreigners, ethnic Georgians holding Russian passports might be able to buy property as a means of “reoccupying” the country (Karaskua 2015). The underlying reasoning here is clearly racist, but apparently carries considerable weight among the Abkhazian public. Even the current president Raul Khajimba, while in opposition, had argued with regard to the housing question: “our task is to preserve the [Abkhazian] ethnic group” (Vyzhutovich 2013).

In 2010 then-President Bagapsh had signaled that new legislation would soon be passed, opening up the Abkhazian housing market to Russians (Rossiyane smogut 2010), but the proposal was shot down by the opposition, and came to naught. The Russian ambassador to Abkhazia, Semen Grigor’ev, described the real estate regime in the country as “a flagrant violation of the rights of citizens of the Russian Federation in Abkhazia” (Vartanyan 2014). Bagapsh’s successor, Aleksandr Ankvab, had allegedly been preparing legislation to allow such purchases when he was president,
but during the election campaign that followed his ouster in 2014, many candidates expressed unclear positions on this thorny question. In private conversations, most of them were in favor of liberalization, Ambassador Grigor’ev claimed, but they also signed a “societal-political accord” in which they pledged to introduce a moratorium on such legislation (Vartanyan 2014). This was a classic example of how Abkhazian politicians temporized, drawn between the conflicting concerns of pleasing both their patron and their voters. Determination to stand up against Russian pressures for allowing the purchase of real estate in Abkhazia has in a sense become a litmus test of patriotic trustworthiness. To win elections, candidates cannot publicly signal willingness to compromise – but at the same time they must pretend such readiness vis-à-vis Russia.⁹

While in opposition, Raul Khajimba had taken a hardline position on the housing issue. He had been skeptical toward handing over to the Russian state even sanatoriums and villas that had belonged to the Soviet Army before the dissolution of the USSR (Voprosy peredachi 2010). But, on being elected president in August 2014, he was confronted head-on with this issue, and Russian newspapers began circulating rumors that Russians would soon be allowed to buy houses and apartments in Abkhazia. This liberalization would affect newly constructed buildings only; land would, as before, remain state property and could not be bought or sold (Rossiyanam razreshat 2014).

A draft law was published in September 2014 (Dokumenty 2014), but then the process stalled again. In August 2015 Khajimba declared: “no hasty decisions on the sale of residential property in Abkhazia to foreigners will be taken before an open discussion has taken place,” and “I did not assume the presidency in order to sell the country, and will not allow anybody else to do so either” (Vlasti Abkhazii 2015). Russian investors had reason to be bewildered. As of this writing (November 2019) the law has still not been changed, and Russian citizens are still barred from buying property in Abkhazia.

In Sukhumi, a Russian–Abkhazian business forum is organized each year where frank and often acrimonious exchanges take place between members of the Russian delegation and Abkhazian politicians and societal figures. At the 2015 forum, the Abkhazian Minister of Economy, Adgur Ardzynba, maintained that it would not be acceptable to rely solely on economic categories when approaching the property question. “We are a small country, and to us these questions are still sensitive” (Adgur Ardzynba 2015). Russian economist Nikita Isaev, who had dared to raise the issue, received this blunt retort from Abkhazian MP Almas Japua: “I am an active opponent of sale of real estate to foreigners. For the time being this question is at the very least premature, and by insisting on it you are pouring a spoonful of tar into our good, warm relations” (Nedvizhimost’ 2015). While it is possible to circumvent the ban on real estate sale to foreigners by going through an Abkhazian front man, sources in the Russian embassy in Sukhumi that prefer to remain anonymous argue strongly against it.¹⁰

The ties that bind

Despite all mutual misgivings, the Russian-Abkhazian patron-client relationship still holds. What is the glue that prevents it from falling apart? In the absence of mutual affection, both parties seem to rely on the interest factor. For Abkhazia, these interests are obvious: without Russian support, the Abkhazian economy would suffer significantly and it would be harder for Abkhazia to resist Georgia’s and the international community’s political pressure. As British analyst Thomas de Waal has perceptively observed, “Abkhaz are pro-Russian much more by necessity than by natural enthusiasm” (de Waal 2010). This is the conclusion drawn also by leading Russian expert Sergei Markedonov: Abkhazians’ cooperation with Russia stems from “a recognized necessity more than from a romantic ideal” (Markedonov 2015). Russia has been chosen as a strategic partner simply because there is no one else to fill that role.

There is firm consensus among Abkhazians that the independence they have won through a bloody war with Georgia, followed by a long blockade with harsh deprivations and hardships, is not to be sold for a mess of pottage. As philosopher Oleg Damenia argues with regard to the real
estate question: the Abkhazians realize that their reluctance to sell land to Russians is retarding the economic development of their country, but “an ethnic anxiety” is preventing them from doing so. They want to live well, but are held back by the fear of becoming a minority again. One-third of the population is living beneath the official poverty line, but the people accept this as the price of their hard-won freedom. As put by Foreign Minister Daur Kove: “We are friends with Russia but we are no appendage (pridatok) to that country. With her 250,000 inhabitants Abkhazia is a very small country, about the same as a Moscow suburb. But we are a nation, and that is a huge difference. We have existed for centuries and will not disappear.”

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As Izida Chania argues, as soon as the real estate question is broached, the opposition will “raise the flag.” The presidents do not dare to go against public opinion here, even if they might want to:

The opposition is playing a very constructive role, not allowing the president to give in to Russian pressure. And Russia cannot blame him for that since his hands are tied. “As you can see, the opposition is standing outside our windows, and they will crush us.” This is all very convenient.

Skeletons in the history closet

An important part of the reason for Abkhazian intransigence seems to lie in lingering memories of the most traumatic event in Abkhazian history: the expulsion of more than a hundred thousand Abkhazians – half of the population – from their homeland to the Ottoman Empire after the failed insurrections against the Russian Empire in 1866 and 1877. In addition, thousands of Abkhazians were sent into internal exile in Russia (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985, 213–216; Rubanik 2010). Abkhazian historians characterize the expulsions as an “ethnic catastrophe” (Lakoba 2004, 12) and a “monstrous” (chudovishnaya) action: “Through a mass deportation beyond the borders on their historical homeland an irreparable loss was inflicted upon the genetic pool (genofond) of the Abkhazian ethnic group. They were plunged into a humanitarian catastrophe” (Achugba 2010, 97, 106).

In tsarist Russia, as a result of the insurrections the Abkhazians were regarded as “a guilty population” (vinovnoe naselenie). This official stigma was removed only in 1907, in recognition of the fact that the Abkhasians had not participated in the 1905 Revolution, but strong resentment continues to be harbored by large segments of the Abkhazian public. Abkhazian historian Teimuraz Achugba even goes as far as to assert that “the discriminatory policy of tsarist authorities in relation to the Abkhazians led to the Abkhazians starting to place greater trust in the neighboring Mingrelians and Georgians than in the Russians” (Achugba 2011). Only the Georgianization policy in the Soviet Union changed that, he claims.

In 2010, a sharp dispute erupted between the leading Abkhazian historian Stanislav Lakoba and Konstantin Zatulin, the Russian politician who, perhaps more than anyone else, has worked incessantly to promote the Abkhazian cause in Moscow. Zatulin resented the tenor of Lakoba’s recent history textbook which – true to historical facts, it must be said – presented Russian–Abkhazian relations as not always rosy. While insisting that he fully understood the pain that the expulsion of their ethnic brethren to Turkey causes Abkhazians today, Zatulin nevertheless insisted that the 1866 insurrection must be characterized as “treason” against Russia, the state of which they were subjects (Zatulin 2011, 368).

Lakoba fired back at what he took as an attempt at political censorship from a Russian politician who wanted to “rewrite the history of Abkhazia.” “Someone thought that the Abkhazian people are too free and evidently decided that they should break down and bridle them, by pulling away from under their feet their very foundation, their history,” (Lakoba 2010, reprinted in Zatulin 2011, 361). Rather than accepting this reprimand, Zatulin published their polemics in a book that he titled, oddly enough, Russia–Abkhazia: Two States, One People (Zatulin 2011). He might have chosen that title as a gesture of good will towards the Abkhazians, but the impression left on the Abkhazian public could easily be the opposite: Zatulin’s wording went a long way to denying them a separate identity.
An Abkhazian national hero of the nineteenth century, Prince Georgii Shevarshidze, son of the last ruler of independent Abkhazia, allegedly once said that “the Abkhazians completely lack any feeling of servility, [we] hate whoever treats [us] haughtily, from above” (quoted in Rubanik 2010, 120). Abkhazians often quote this, as this is how many of them feel they are being treated by Russians also today: recall the criticism voiced by the Abkhazian MP quoted at the beginning of this article: someone is “trying to bend us into the likeness of a goat horn.”

The Abkhazians are not prepared to exchange one master for another – the Georgians for the Russians. As Deputy Prime Minister Beslan Butba declared at a 2014 roundtable on Russian–Abkhazian relations, “we are proud, strong, and independent people. [Therefore], the main task of the government over the next five years is to make sure that we will no longer have to ask anybody for help” (Rossiisko-abkhazskie 2014).

Is the Abkhazian case unique?

Is Abkhazian willingness to confront its patron exceptional or can we find similar behavior also among other de facto states? In my view, the determination to defend its state interests against its protector is considerably larger in Abkhazia than what we can observe elsewhere, but it is not unique. As pointed out in the introduction, also in most other de facto client states the political leaders have been shown to have agency and willingness to use it vis-à-vis the patron. A number of factors have nevertheless created a situation where Abkhazian politics towards its patron differ from that of other unrecognised states.

Below I compare Abkhazian patron politics with South Ossetia and Transnistria, the two most similar cases among the de facto states. These three statelets were all established at the same time – in 1990–1992 – and under similar circumstances – as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. They also depend upon the support of the same patron – Russia.

In elections in both South Ossetia and Transnistria the voters have demonstrated that they do not necessarily heed Russian wishes as to the preferred outcomes. In Transnistria in 2011 and in South Ossetia in both 2011 and 2017 Russia signaled unambiguous preference for one particular candidate, but in all three cases the voters ignored the wishes of the patron and supported another candidate (Devyatkov 2012, 59; Ó Beacháin 2015).

At the same time, pro-Russian sentiments continue to be much stronger in both South Ossetia and Transnistria than in Abkhazia. While in Abkhazia it may be a liability to be identified as a pliant candidate doing Moscow’s bidding, in both South Ossetia and Transnistria politicians have on the contrary been bending over to prove their pro-Russian credentials (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2017). In 2006, the Transnistrian authorities held a referendum on the future of their unrecognized state with the question, “Do you support the course towards the independence of Transnistria and the subsequent free association with the Russian Federation?” The wording of the question made it clear that “independence” should be only a stepping stone towards inclusion into the Russian Federation. The Kremlin was not happy with this, as they were not prepared to welcome Transnistria into the Russian Federation (Rogstad 2018, 59). Tiraspol nevertheless went ahead with the referendum and received overwhelming support: more than 97% of the voters endorsed it (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2011, 206).

A similar referendum was planned in South Ossetia in 2016 (TASS 2016) but was scuttled due to Russian resistance: after the massive condemnation of the Crimean annexation in 2014 the Kremlin full well understood that any further state expansion at the expense of neighboring states was not in Russia’s interests. However, the South Ossetians proved their independent agency in a paradoxical way by being excessively pro-Russian: in the presidential elections in 2017 they chose the candidate who more than his rivals expressed willingness to pursue this policy goal against Russian resistance (Fuller 2017a; Kolstø 2020). By contrast, in Abkhazia there is no discussion whatsoever about organizing a referendum on unification with Russia.
Parallel with the negotiation between Abkhazia and Russia on deeper collaboration, which ended with the Agreement on Alliance and Strategic Partnership in 2014, Russia negotiated a similar agreement with South Ossetia. Also in this case, Ambrosio and Lange (2016, 688) argue, the de facto state leaders “demonstrated a tangible degree of agency” and received “considerable concessions” from the Russian patron. Even so, there were significant differences between the final versions of the two treaties. The crucial word “integration” (integratsiya) that the Abkhazians fought tooth and nail – and successfully – to have deleted from the text, was retained in the South Ossetian version, as it did not run counter to Ossetian interests. And indeed, integration into Russian state structures has proceeded much further in South Ossetia than in Abkhazia. For instance, the units of the South Ossetian armed forces are fully integrated parts of the Russian army (German 2016, 159; Mardasov 2016). Between 2005 and 2011, South Ossetia had three prime ministers in a row who were Russian citizens, none of whom had any local roots in the de facto state (Gerrits and Bader 2016, 304). The concept of “creeping annexation” that is sometimes used to describe Russia’s policy towards both of its two client states in the South Caucasus (German 2016; Popescu 2006, 7; Otarashvili 2015) is in my view misplaced with regard to Abkhazia but may describe Russian–South Ossetian relations somewhat more accurately.

What can account for the differences between the Abkhazian wariness and Transnistrian and South Ossetian willingness towards integration with Russia? In my view, economic calculations can only to a small degree explain this difference. Of the three Russian de facto client states, South Ossetia is clearly most dependent upon economic support from the patron: South Ossetia already receives state subsidies that far exceed what many Russian regions get, also without formal membership in the Federation (Artman 2013). In contrast, Transnistria has a more solid economy and diversified foreign trade than Abkhazia and would arguably have somewhat less difficulty surviving without economic subvention from Russia. Hence, there is no clear correlation between economic dependence and desire for integration vs. independence.

Moreover, the vast majority of the population in the three de facto states already have Russian citizenship and enjoy many of the same social benefits as citizens of the Russian Federation (Nagashima 2019), although as non-residents, they do not have access to the same medical facilities and educational institutions as Russian citizens residing in Russia (Artman 2013, 697). This factor may arguably explain the eagerness of Transnistrians and South Ossetians to obtain full Russian citizenship, but then we would have to explain why Abkhazians are willing to forego these benefits.

The two most important factors that can explain the exceptional Abkhazian intransigence, therefore, seem to be cultural rather than pragmatic and economic. First, ethnic consciousness plays an important role in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but have different consequences. As pointed out above, even if the Abkhazians in the Soviet period were granted their own autonomous republic, this did not prevent a gradual erosion of their demographic preponderance on their ancestral soil. When the Soviet Union collapsed, ethnic Abkhazians’ share of the population in the Abkhazian ASSR was down to less than 18%, engendering something of a survival trauma. After independence, they have gradually rebuilt their demographic strength as well as political power (Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2013) and they see their survival as a nation as linked to having their own state.

By contrast, the main homeland of the Ossetians is not South Ossetia but North Ossetia on the other side of the Caucasian mountains. Today, the vast majority of ethnic Ossetians live in the Russian republic of North Ossetia – 700,000 versus only about 35,000 people who are left in South Ossetia after the 2008 war. The South Ossetians migrated to Georgia in the eighteenth century, and many of them see themselves as a diaspora of sorts and their de facto state as an Ossetian irredenta. To them, annexation into the Russian Federation is not so much a goal in itself as a means to be united with the rest of the Ossetian nation. It is true that Abkhazians also have ethnic relatives in Russia, but their identity links with Adygeans, Kabardinians, and Cherkessians in the Russian Federation are weaker and do not exert the same pull as the strong desire of most South Ossetians to be united with the North Ossetians.
For the Transnistrians, ethnic considerations do not play a strong role in identity politics. In terms of Soviet census categories, the Transnistrian population is divided into three major groups – Moldovans, Russians, and Ukrainians; hence, if ethnic loyalty had been paramount, they should have been drawn in three different directions. Instead, based on a shared Soviet culture and history they have developed a common “Transnistrian” identity (Kolstø and Malgin 1998), but this identity is primarily a defensive strategy against what they perceived as virulent Moldovan nationalism on west-bank Moldova in the early 1990s and does not necessarily preclude inclusion into the Russian Federation. The geographic distance from Russia would in any case provide ample ground for a separate regional identity within the Russian Federation.

For the Abkhazians, arguably even more important than the ethnic factor are memories of historical grievances. For some of them the trauma of the expulsion of half of the population in the Russian Empire overshadows even the discrimination they suffered in the Georgian SSR during the Soviet period, although for pragmatic reasons the injustices inflicted upon them under the tsars are less focused upon in the public discourse.

There is nothing similar in the history of either Transnistria or South Ossetia. Insofar as the Transnistrian population look back on atrocities committed against them in the past, it is linked to Romanian occupation during World War II, and not to life under Russian tsars or Soviet commissars (Solonari 2012). Similarly, in the Tsarist Empire the Ossetians as a predominantly Orthodox Christian people were trusted by the state authorities – uniquely among the mountain peoples in the Caucasus (Olson 1994, 521–525). Therefore, there are no strong elements in their collective memory that push either of them away from Russia, as in Abkhazia.

Epilogue

Finally, the reader may legitimately ask why the Russians are prepared to put up with such “difficult” behavior from one of its client states. This has not been in focus of this study and I can only offer some very tentative answers.

If the benefits to Abkhazians in their relationship with their patron are plain to see, Russian compliance may be harder to explain. The most common arguments adduced from the Russian side are geopolitical and strategic. The Russian ambassador to Abkhazia, Aleksei Dvinyanin, maintains that the most important directions in their bilateral directions are military–political: border guards and political dialogue. Leading Russian foreign policy analyst Fedor Lukyanov agrees, and maintains that in the field of security the synergy of interests and possibilities in Russian–Abkhazian relations “is almost complete”: while Abkhazia needs guarantees against Georgian revanchism, “Russia is interested in strengthening its presence in the important Caucasian–Black Sea zone” (Lukyanov 2014).

Radio Liberty analyst Liz Fuller argues that Russia’s primary interests in Abkhazia are threefold: military and strategic, centered on the military base in Gudauta; geopolitical, demonstrating that Abkhazia is part of the Russian sphere of interest; and to ensure that Abkhazia develops into a politically stable and economically viable polity (Fuller 2017b). On the third point, Russia has failed badly so far – but, perversely, the dismal state of Abkhazia’s economy and the threatening lawlessness in this country may be an additional argument in favor of continued strong Russian economic support: Russia cannot tolerate the emergence of a “black hole,” a criminalized badland, right next to Sochi, its “Black Sea Riviera” (Putin poobeshchal 2017).

These elements are no doubt important, but they cannot fully explain Russian acquiescence. As to Fuller’s second point, it is not immediately clear just why having this small strip of land within the Russian sphere of interest should be so important as to outweigh the costs of international opprobrium for breaching the international prohibition against unilateral secession and annexation of territory from another state. While the Abkhazians claim that they can reciprocate the Russian support by backing Russian security interests, it can also be argued that the relationship could prove a liability for the patron, should Russia become interested in improving its relations with Georgia.
In whichever way one looks at it, it is clear that the Russian–Abkhazian relationship is strongly lopsided: the Abkhazians depend upon Russia much more than the other way around. In objective terms, Russia should have the upper hand in all bilateral negotiations, but still they are often yielding to the wishes of the client. As expressed by Russia’s ambassador to Abkhazia, “Maybe the time will come when the people [in Russia] who do the distribution of the financial resources will make demands, but so far they try to decide all the problems in a friendly manner.”19

One factor that may make Russian leniency more explicable is the country’s diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia in 2008. Since that time, Russia has been linked to its client in a community of fate. As Konstantin Zatulin explains, for Russia to retract its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia would mean “a complete loss of face,” not only in the Caucasus but in international relations at large. “It would mean a betrayal first and foremost of ourselves, of our status as a great power” (Bez Rossi 2011).

One consequence of Russian recognition has been to strengthen Abkhazia’s hand in bilateral relations. For Russia, this act was in a sense a Rubicon from which there was no turning back. In a situation where, in addition to Russia, only a handful of minor states have accorded diplomatic recognition to Abkhazia, it is practically impossible for Russia to threaten to withdraw from its patronhood – and that gives Abkhazia considerable room for maneuver in the bilateral relationship.

Notes
1. The exception is Somaliland, whose parent state, Somalia, is itself a failed state mired in internal turmoil.
2. According to economist Khatuna Shat-ipa at the Abkhazian Center for Strategic Research under the President, in the 10-year period 2009–2018 these subventions amounted to approximately 40 billion rubles (in addition to payment of Russian pensions to Abkhazian citizens). This represented more than half of the Abkhazian state budget. Author’s interview, Sukhum/i, 31 August 2018.
3. For a discussion of the difference between “de facto states” and “puppet states,” see Kamila and Berg (2012).
4. The capital of Abkhazia is called Sukhum in Abkhazian and Sukhumi in Georgian. In academic texts it is customary to render the name of the city as Sukhum/i as an attempt to achieve linguistic impartiality.
5. The full text of all three versions has been published by Kavkazskii Uzel in three parallel columns, which make it easy to compare them. See Proekty (2014).
6. Author’s interview with Izida Chania, Sukhum/i, 27 August 2018.
7. Author’s interview, Sukhum/i, 27 August 2018.
8. The only instance I have registered when Abkhazian authorities have arguably been “playing several foreign policy cards at the expense of Russian interests” was when Sukhum/i city administration in 2016 contacted a a Czech supplier to develop a so-called “smart city” scheme in the Abkhazian capital. A common Russian reaction was that “in Russia there are many companies who are specializing in the realization of similar projects of high quality with prices that are certainly not higher than what European business is prepared to offer” (Belyakov 2016). The project apparently never materialized.
9. Author’s interview with Arda Inal-ipa, the Center for Humanitarian Programs, Sukhum/i, 30 August 2018.
10. Author’s interview in the Russian embassy in Sukhum/i, 29 August 2018.
11. Author’s interview, Sukhum/i, 31 August 2018.
12. Author’s interview, Sukhum/i, 28 August 2018.
13. Author’s interview, Sukhum/i, 27 August 2018.
14. Some Abkhazian historians cite even higher numbers, up to 180,000. For instance G.A. Dzidzariia, cited in Achugba (2010, 105).
15. Author’s interview with Oleg Damenia, Sukhum/i, 31 August 2018.
16. As of 2013, less than 20% of Transnistrian exports went to Russia, compared to 40% to Moldova and more than 25% to EU member states (Ó Beacháin, Comai, and Tsurtumia-Zurabashvili 2016, 449).
17. Author’s interview, Sukhum/i, 29 August 2018.
18. Abkhazian philosopher Oleg Damenia acknowledges that for Russia it would have been more advantageous to have Abkhazia, with its pro-Russian orientation, within Georgia, in order to restrain the geopolitical orientation of Georgia through Abkhazia (Damenia 2011, 78).
19. Author’s interview, Sukhum/i, 29 August 2018.


Kobakiya, A. 2013. "Abkhaziya Nachinayut Gnut [They are Beginning to Bend Abkhazia]." Nuzhnaya Gazeta, July 20. https://abh-n.ru/abkazhnoe-chno-


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