

# Fear And In(Security) in De-Facto States: Assessing South Ossetian Elections

Written by Ana Maria Albulescu

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ANA MARIA ALBULESCU, NOV 22 2020

Throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, secessionist wars have ravaged various countries across the world, with important repercussions for the population at large. In such contexts, where the initial violent outbreak of conflict has not resolved the secessionist demands of groups striving for self-determination, a complex environment of enduring state contestation has emerged. One has witnessed the gradual transformations of war-time factions into successful de-facto states challenging the power of the metropolitan centres from which they wish to obtain independence. Against this background, this article goes beyond a state-centric conceptualization towards understanding the sources of fear and the perception of threats in the context of electoral processes in de-facto states. To this end, the article firstly discusses the concept of security with reference to the specific understanding of fear, threats and vulnerabilities and the analytical relevance of these concepts for the study of de-facto states. Secondly, this article provides empirical evidence of the role of elections in South Ossetia in exacerbating the sense of insecurity of the de-facto regime led by Edward Kokoity between 2004 and 2006. The final section of this article argues that despite managing to foster a sense of unity as part of the parliamentary elections in 2004, the regime was left vulnerable to the threat arising from the Georgian government, one that was particularly evident throughout the contest for the South Ossetian presidency in 2006.

### **Fear and (in) security in unrecognized states: A conceptual discussion**

As Barry Buzan (2007) points out, the notion of security is a contested concept that has been heavily influenced by the idea that it is only states, as the bearers of sovereignty and power that are the referent objects of security. Thus:

States are by far the most powerful type of unit in the international system. As a form of political organization, the state has transcended, and often crushed, all other political units to the extent that it has become the universal standard of political legitimacy (Buzan, 2007, p. 65).

Indeed, the realist tradition in IR has traditionally supported the view that security is merely a derivative of power and that when confronted with the anarchical nature of the international system, states that manage to maximize other power gains in the international system will also manage to achieve security (Morgenthau, 1948). Thus, it has been argued that both IR theory and Security Studies have made the state their primary focus of analysis (Buzan, 2007).

This aspect is of particular importance for the present article as it deals with the study of de-facto states. The literature dealing with the cases of unrecognized states in the post-Soviet space has varied between accounts of frozen conflicts (Aphrasidze and Siroky, 2010; Ciobanu, 2008; Closson *et al.*, 2008; King, 2001) and research predominantly emphasising the role of Russia's involvement in this space (Kästner, 2010; Kolsto, 2000; Popescu, 2006; Tolstrup, 2009). Scholars have also dealt with the evolution and internal dynamics of de-facto states (Caspersen, 2013; Lynch, 2002, 2004; Pegg, 1998a, 1998b, 2004) among which the role of democratization has been prioritized towards a gradual acknowledgment of the state-like characteristics of these entities (Broers, 2005; Caspersen, 2011).

In this context this article engages with the analytical framework employed by Buzan (2007) for discussing the

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concept of security in international relations on the basis that states have specific identifiable components such as: 1.The idea of the state; 2.The physical basis of the state and 3.The institutional expression (Buzan, 2007). Whilst this framework suggests that sovereignty represents an additional aspect that clearly distinguishes states from other units of the international relations (Buzan, 2007), this article argues that scholars dealing with the study of de-facto states have provided substantial evidence from the post-Soviet space that despite the persistence of non-recognition, de-facto states have achieved certain degree of 'statehood' (Caspersen, 2015; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008). Furthermore, they have managed to sustain complex interactions with what have traditionally been viewed as their patrons that does not involve a clear cut relationship of dependency (Caspersen, 2008).

This trend has involved a series of sustained efforts by the leaders of these entities to maintain control over a specific territory, to build a unique identity and not least to exercise power through a particular set of institutions, in parallel and often in opposition to central governments. The applicability of Buzan's analysis of the state to the study of unrecognized states is thus justified by the need to understand the specificity of contexts in which:

non-state units that command political military power see themselves either as aspirant state-makers or as seeking more control over a political space within an existing state (Buzan, 2007, p. 65).

Let us then look at what the conceptualization of these three components of the state might mean for the study of unrecognized states and their security. The first aspect that is relevant for this analysis is related to the fact that the birth of unrecognized states such as Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia is the result of unresolved secessionist conflicts over the *physical basis* of the former Soviet states of the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. Despite not being recognized, the relative success of separatists in these countries to control parts of the territories of these sovereign states since the secessionist conflicts in the 1990s has led to the consolidation of parallel security, governance and political institution and the persistence of demands for sovereignty rooted in a commitment by separatist leaders to consolidate their own authority over parts of these territory and often promote a parallel idea of the state (Blakkisrud and Kolstø, 2011).

In Transnistria the *institutional expression of the state* has meant that in the aftermath of the 1992 secessionist war, the separatist authorities have built institutions sustaining a parallel economy, political regime and security architecture. The de-facto state is governed based on its own Constitution, ratified in 2005 after first signing in 1996 by the President of Transnistria, Igor Smirnov. Alongside the presidency, the Transnistrian political system is built around the Supreme Soviet, a legislature composing 43 deputies that have a 5-year mandate. These ensure the legislative power to be exercised alongside a presidency (Strautiu and Tabara, 2015). Similarly, if looking at the *institutional expression of the state*, South Ossetia and Abkhazia provide additional examples of the way in which different processes characteristics of fully fledged recognized states have taken place in these entities. Indeed, the consolidation of the de-facto state of South Ossetia has been the result of a parallel state-building project that saw the development of its own institutions and the consolidation of a political regime through repeated elections both at parliamentary and presidential levels.

The reorganization of Soviet institutions in South Ossetia meant that a degree of de-facto statehood allowed for the territorial and social control of its people to be carried out under the authority of South Ossetia despite the lack of international recognition (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008). Finally, in Abkhazia, the consolidation of the de-facto state for over two decades of non-recognition was possible due to the way in which the separatists had transformed themselves in the aftermath of war into successful state-builders aiming to develop new institutions for independence on the remnants of old Soviet institutions that would sustain the claims to statehood made by the de-facto state (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008). Based on the 1994 Constitution Abkhazia holds presidential elections for a five-year term. The president has the power to appoint cabinet ministers and the Prime Minister, rule over parliamentary elections and regulate the appointment and dismissal of executive authorities in districts and cities. The Parliament which is called the People's Assembly is also elected for a five-year term, with 36 members being voted in single-seat constituencies (International Crisis Group [ICG] 2006, 2007).

Where does the evidence of these parallel state-building projects then leave our understanding of the *idea of the state* that is being promoted by the de-facto states? And indeed what can this particular idea reveal about the

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perception of threats in de-facto states? Dov Lynch (2007) for example takes the view that in the post-Soviet de-facto states the parallel state-building projects carried out by the separatist leaderships have been dominated by an insistence on the fear arising from the 'existential challenge posed by the former central power' (2007, p. 489). In his view this represents a 'powerful glue binding the residual populations of these areas together into some kind of cohesive whole' (Lynch, 2007, p. 489).

Furthermore, as Caspersen (2013) points out with regards to the specific idea holding de-facto states together:

unrecognized states draw a lot of strength from the common identity they have fostered, so why risk jeopardizing this by encouraging political divisions? There is a perceived need for unity and a fear that any divisions will weaken the entity. The proclaimed unity is, furthermore, central to their claim to self-determination, which is based on homogenous interests and aspirations (...). The emphasis on unity is reinforced by the persistence of an external threat and the predominance of the military, and hence by the context of non-recognition (p. 93).

In engaging with these arguments this article seeks to analyse the particular sources of fear and perception of threats that shape enduring secessionist demands expressed by de-facto states, by drawing on empirical evidence from South Ossetia. Furthermore as Buzan's framework of analysis seeks to differentiate between the ways in which states act to maximize their security by seeking to reduce either their external threats or address their internal vulnerabilities it is important to understand that in practice this distinction is not always helpful. Thus, this article supports the view that often the sense of fear that underpins the strategic difficulties facing leaders of de-facto states arises from the fact that: 'Insecurity reflects a combination of threats and vulnerabilities, and the two cannot meaningfully be separated' (Buzan, 2007, p. 104). In support of this argument, the following section of this article will analyse the electoral context in South Ossetia in the period 2004-2006.

## **Elections in South Ossetia: Assessing threats and vulnerabilities**

In order to understand the exacerbated sense of insecurity and fear facing the South Ossetian regime in the context of escalating tensions with Georgia that have taken place between 2004 and 2006 (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2004), one has to acknowledge that elections have generated a distinctive perception of threat arising from the metropolitan state as a result of direct actions of the Georgian government to destroy the capacity and legitimacy of the separatist regime throughout two rounds of electoral tests held in South Ossetia. The purpose of this section is to highlight the role of parliamentary and presidential elections in South Ossetia as means of responding to this strategy and addressing the threats and vulnerabilities facing the incumbent South Ossetian regime led by Eduard Kokoity.

On the 23<sup>d</sup> of May 2004, parliamentary elections organized in South Ossetia saw the battle between the Unity Party of incumbent President Eduard Kokoity, the Communist Party led by Parliament Speaker Stanislav Kochiev and the People's Party. Around 52% of the voters came to the polls on the day of the election, with the ballot being organized in 75 polling stations and observed by representatives from Moscow, Transnistria and Abkhazia. The outcome of the election clearly put Eduard Kokoity's party in the lead as Unity managed to win two thirds of the Parliament. The elections soon showed the failure of the on-going Georgian strategy that sought to elicit dissatisfaction towards Kokoity and a rapprochement towards Tbilisi (Cornell and Starr, 2015). Furthermore they represented a major achievement of the regime to strengthen its power base.

Thus, in June 2004, South Ossetia appealed to the Russian Duma to incorporate its territory into the Russian Federation whilst on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September its leader Eduard Kokoity declared that it was time to end the division with North Ossetia and that any possibility for reunification with Georgia is out of the question (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2004). Both parties were committed to escalating policies as a result of actions justified on the basis of their primary political goals and incompatibility. South Ossetia justified its actions towards unification with North Ossetia through its legitimate right to self-determination as well as the strengthened ties with the Russian province (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2004). Georgia, on the other hand justified its mobilization as a legitimate action against contraband and an attempt to restore order on Georgian territory (The British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] 2004).

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The Parliamentary elections in South Ossetia had a key role to play in terms of the type of information that they elicited through the election campaign as well as through the results related to turnout. As analysts indicate, and indeed as the voter turnout suggests a certain fatigue among the electorate was felt at the time. In de-facto states, where leaders are usually able to mobilize supporters around the issue of independence, the 2004 voter turnout was lower than in other polls. Furthermore, with fears growing at the time that the elections will be used to downgrade the parliament, the role of the two main parties and the platforms they supported are important. Indeed, both parties campaigned on the patriotic vote, with similar programmes promoting the resolution of the conflict through further cooperation with North Ossetia and Russia (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2004). Thus, it should be stressed that rather than eliciting information about a potential opposition with different views about the secessionist agenda, that would have threatened the unity gathered around the secessionist agenda, the role of these parliamentary elections was to signal a certain degree of fatigue among the electorate. With a strengthened regime in the aftermath of these elections, the main challenge facing Kokoity was thus to retain support for a strong secessionist agenda.

Faced with this type of internal pressure to be able to mobilize voters around issues of national interest and to deliver on the politics of secession against Georgian actions between 2004 and 2006, Kokoity's strategy in the 2006 presidential elections was to organize a referendum for independence, one that would both constitute a strong response to Georgian actions as well as provide an opportunity for alienated voters to become more engaged with the issue of independence. The question asked in the referendum was: 'Should the republic of South Ossetia retain its current status as an independent State, and be recognized by the international community?' (Landru, 2006). The response of the Georgian government to this aggravating dynamic was to de-legitimize the incumbent Kokoity regime by organizing parallel elections in the de-facto state and support an alternative administration unit led by Dmitry Sanakoyev, a Prime-Minister and supporter of Kokoity (*Prime-News [Georgia]*, 2006b).

As Hale (2014) points out, following the consolidation of his regime throughout his first presidency, on the 12th of November Kokoity was able to achieve a second mandate by pulling together the resources of his political machine. The margin of victory was 98 percent of the vote for the election of the President, whilst 99 percent of the voters opted for independence (*NEWSru.Co.II*, 2006).

However, in the parallel poll organized in the Georgian controlled villages, Sanakoev was also declared a winner, thus generating the situation of 'dual power' within South Ossetia that dominated the next two years. The results of the parallel referendums also contributed to this development, as Kokoity was given a new impetus for his territorial demands, whilst Tbilisi aimed at strengthening the parallel authority of Dmitry Sanakoev through the establishment of an alternative administration (*Prime-News (Georgia)*, 2006a).

In the aftermath of the parallel poll this de-legitimation strategy was at the core of a clashing state-building project that saw major economic investment in the Georgian administered districts (Gogia, 2009). After the election held on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November 2006 two self-proclaimed governments existed in South Ossetia: the Tskhinvali-based administration led by Eduard Kokoity and the government supported from Tbilisi led by Dmitry Sanakoyev that was based in Kurta. The Kokoity administration was backed by Russia and supported the plan for independence from Georgia, whilst Sanakoyev ran on a platform of close cooperation with Tbilisi that supported Georgia's territorial integrity.

In spring 2007, the Georgian President detailed his plan for supporting an administrative unit on the territory of South Ossetia that was to be led by Dmitry Sanakoyev alongside deputy ministers in the fields of education, culture, agriculture and economy in charge of the region. A budget was adopted for the functioning of this administration, thus clashing with the existing governance structures already present in South Ossetia. The purpose of the administrative unit was to conduct important economic reconstruction in the region as well as to facilitate the peaceful settlement of the conflict and was viewed as a temporary step towards granting South Ossetia autonomous status (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2007b). Tbilisi supported financially the Sanakoyev administration with a budget of 12 million lari, whilst Russia was aiding the Kokoity regime through the stepping up of payments for salaries and pensions for the South Ossetian region (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2007b).

The clashing nature of these economic packages arose in the context of an existing conflict of interests between

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Russia and Georgia, with the two being viewed as competing for the loyalty of the two constituencies in South Ossetia. Whilst Georgia addressed through its economic support the three Georgian controlled provinces in South Ossetia, accusations were levelled against the Russian sponsored programme of economic rehabilitation as a means of supporting the Kokoity regime. Despite this, a new measure of support was passed through the resolution on the Georgian Parliament from 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2007 to support the new administrative unit in South Ossetia (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2007b).

This context and specifically the outside support for an alternative regime highlights the complexity of the situation on the ground in terms of the types of threats faced by the South Ossetian regime. This article argues that the external threat of the Georgian state was made clear by the direct actions of support for the Sanakoyev regime. One should note that despite Kokoity's victory with an overwhelming majority the dual authority that was established following these elections essentially represented the consolidation of a different type of opposition for the regime, one that exacerbated the sense of existential threat from Georgia. This was a case of two parallel nationalistic state-building projects contributing to the establishment of conflictual relations between the sides As Blakkisrud and Kolstø (2012) point out, in the years leading up to the 2008 war, this trend continued and the authority of the de facto government of South Ossetia was challenged by Georgian supported authority structures consolidated within the former autonomous region leading to an increased struggle for social and territorial control that ultimately resulted in war.

## Conclusion

This article has provided a discussion of fear in unrecognized states starting from the assumption that the concept of security proposed by International Relations scholars is dominated by a focus on the state as the primary unit of analysis in the international system. Hence one could be tempted to assume that in the absence of recognition the sense of insecurity developed by other types of actors is markedly different. By providing a conceptual discussion of the evolution and consolidation of de-facto states in the post-Soviet space this article has highlighted specific similarities that these entities share with recognized states in terms of the functioning of core institutions as well as the importance placed on controlling a specific territory towards the consolidation of the idea of the state.

Nevertheless, this article has also emphasized the key role played by the lack of recognition in de-facto states for blurring the line between external threats and internal vulnerabilities. By relying on evidence from South Ossetia, it has shown the way in which in the absence of recognition, the institutions built by the South Ossetian regime remained vulnerable to Georgia's re-assertion of sovereignty between 2004 and 2006. Thus, despite managing to deter the fear of an internal opposition that would have arisen from political disunity as a result of parliamentary elections, the regime led by Edward Kokoity was faced with a much more complex threat arising from the fierce opposition of the Georgian-supported administration which was intended to challenge the existence of the state that he was seeking to build.

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**Dr Ana Maria Albulescu** completed her PhD in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, focusing on the consolidation of post-conflict political orders in contexts of incomplete secession across the post-Soviet space.