

Conceptualising post-Soviet de facto states as small dependent jurisdictions

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Abstract

De facto states, according to the most established elaborations of the concept, by definition strive towards full-fledged, internationally recognised independence. However, in many cases independence may actually be perceived as a second best option. This article argues that in seeking further integration with a patron post-Soviet de facto states are behaving similarly to small-sized dependent jurisdictions in other parts of the world. Conceptualising post-Soviet de facto states as small dependent jurisdictions contributes to a more nuanced understanding of their state-building project, their relationship with the patron state, their political economy, as well as their long-term path of development.

Keywords

de facto states, post-Soviet, self-determination, dependent jurisdictions, MIRAB

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Conceptualising post-Soviet de facto states as small dependent jurisdictions

*“First of all, one has to decide, in any given work, whether one is
mainly after similarities or differences. [...]*

*A second point is that, within the limits of plausible argument,
the most instructive comparisons (whether of difference or
similarity) are those that surprise.”*

(B. Anderson, 2016, p. 130)

De facto states, according to the most established elaborations of the concept, by definition strive towards full-fledged, internationally recognised independence.¹ This is in line with conventional wisdom of international relations: ‘full independence is often seen as a peerless alternative for stateless, nationalistically distinct populations, if only they could achieve such an outcome’ (Rezvani, 2014, p. vii). However, post-Soviet de facto states ‘seem to have transgressed international expectations that de facto states should indeed be resolutely “self-determinist”’ (Broers, 2013, p. 62) by seeking integration with a patron.² In this article, it is argued that there is nothing surprising about this and that widespread expectations that every territory inhabited by a distinct population should strive for full independence, rather than seek closer relations with a strong patron or a former colonial master, are a leftover of ‘a way of thinking in the days when nation building, independence, sovereignty and nationalism were self-evident categories of a people’s statehood’ (Jong & Kruijt, 2005, p. 4).

In seeking support, security guarantees and integration with a strong patron, authorities of de facto states are effectively following a global trend, whereby uncontested territories, UN-member states, and constitutionally distinct sub-state entities are developing such arrangements as the best option for their long-term development (Rezvani, 2014, 2016). There is a multitude of reasons behind the choice of each of these territories. Pragmatism, however, probably ranks high among them: non-sovereign jurisdictions tend to perform considerably better than neighbouring independent states across a number of parameters,

including wealth, health and education (McElroy & Parry, 2012).³ Besides, such relationships also imply strong security guarantees. As highlighted by Baldacchino and Hepburn (2012, p. 561), 'there are clear economic and security advantages in being associated with a larger, richer, metropolitan patron,' and this holds true not only for the island jurisdictions at the centre of their research, but also for post-Soviet de facto states.

To what extent do characterisations and theoretical insights developed in reference to small dependent jurisdictions (such as micro-states and island jurisdictions in the South Pacific and the Caribbean) apply to post-Soviet de facto states such as Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh?⁴ More fundamentally, how can they contribute to enhance our understanding of prevalent dynamics in these territories? In order to approach these questions, this article discusses interrelated aspects that have featured in scholarly debates on both sets of entities, focusing on the preferred status option of these jurisdictions (fully-fledged independence, or enhanced integration/association with the patron), the treaties at the basis of shared sovereignty arrangements, as well as issues of external assistance and economic sustainability. By exploring the similarities between post-Soviet de facto states and small dependent jurisdictions in other parts of the world, this article points at some of the ways in which an established and apparently distant scholarship offers new approaches and analytical tools that can fruitfully be employed in ongoing research endeavours on post-Soviet de facto states. As a consequence, and acknowledging the primary importance of security guarantees provided by the patron to post-Soviet de facto states, this article deals mainly with financial assistance and external support to state- and capacity-building.⁵

On the basis of the comparison at the centre of this article, it is argued that introducing insights from the literature on small dependent jurisdictions to the study of post-Soviet de facto states offers new analytical frameworks, approaches and venues of research that may usefully feed into a growing literature on these entities. Conceptualizing post-Soviet de facto states as small dependent jurisdictions allows for a more nuanced appreciation of their attitude towards independence, their relationship with a patron, their sustainability, their state-building project, as well as the political economy underlying their continued existence. As will be highlighted, post-Soviet de facto states seem to be "normal" small dependent jurisdictions in many respects: they mostly prefer integration with a patron to fully-fledged independence, their state-capacity and political economy is largely determined by the technical and financial assistance they receive from external actors, their economic structure fits at least in part the MIRAB model (migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy)

originally developed in reference to Pacific islands, yet they may be more sustainable than expected thanks to 'aid entitlement'.

The next section introduces the concept of 'small dependent jurisdiction' by outlining key features of relevant entities, thus setting the stage for the parts that follow.

Small dependent jurisdictions and the MIRAB model

Rezvani's (2016) definition of 'partially independent territory',⁶ combined with a requirement of small size,⁷ can serve as a starting point for the concept of small dependent jurisdiction at the basis of this article. Dependence, however, is here understood to be not only determined by constitutional or treaty-based arrangements, but also reaffirmed through structural, long-term external support.⁸ In small dependent jurisdictions, such financial and technical assistance effectively determines the capacity of local authorities to deliver public goods and services to a resident population at current levels, and either directly or indirectly provides for a large share of incomes to the local budget. In brief, entities with a substantial degree of self-government, a population of less than one million, and structural assistance that routinely covers for more than one third of public expenditure without leaving a residue of debt can be considered small dependent jurisdictions. Sovereign and non-sovereign entities as different as Greenland, Palau, and the Cook Islands would all qualify.

Small dependent jurisdictions demonstrate 'creative governance practices and a political economy that typically pits a small state or territory with a larger, richer power.' (Baldacchino, 2012a, p. 236), such as a former colonial master or the administrator of a trust territory. Whether they are formally independent or not, they are often the result of different outcomes of the process of decolonisation. Many 'suffer from poor location in that they are remote and/or landlocked' (Easterly & Kraay, 2000, p. 2013). If they were fully independent, they would qualify as micro-states according to most definitions of the concept. Some small dependent jurisdictions, such as Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands, achieved formal independence, but the fact they have become UN member states did not make them any less dependent: Lake (1996, p. 8) referred to them as 'protectorates', and Rezvani (2014, p. 90) included them among cases of partially independent territories because 'in fact they divide and share their sovereignty with another state.' Indeed, formal independence has only further highlighted the dependence on patrons and donors of these jurisdictions, to the point that scholars have questioned if it is still possible to talk of sovereignty when 'financial assistance [...] is required simply for the governments [...] to meet

their budgetary needs (including paying the salaries of government employees)' (Levine, 2012, p. 448).

It is common for small dependent jurisdictions to outsource governance functions and accept limits to their self-rule in exchange for security guarantees, freedom of movement, financial support, and technical assistance. Cutting economic, political, and security ties with their patron would hardly enhance the welfare or domestic capabilities of these territories, but rather leave them 'in a status of being alone, poor and destitute in a harsh and unforgiving world' (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012, p. 558). As pointed out by Brookfield (1972, pp. 141–142) in the context of decolonization,

if the available local resources in these countries are inevitably insufficient to support either the transformation or maintenance of welfare at present and desired levels, then there is no alternative to dependence but stagnation and retrogression. Independence may give a nation self-respect, [...] but it is a self-respect that must be severely constrained by awareness that the power of economic decision making is greatly limited. To maximise self-respect is not accordant with maximisation of either income or welfare.

Largely due to this condition of systemic dependence, the economic structure of many small dependent jurisdictions is found to fit the so-called MIRAB model (migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy), initially introduced by Bertram and Watters (1985) in reference to island jurisdictions in the South Pacific.⁹ Territories that fit the model are characterised by strong out-bound migration, their economy is dependent on remittances and aid, and the government sector is the dominant employer. The original proponents of the model highlighted that the MIRAB economic order may be much more sustainable than largely expected. Domestic economic development is not the only possible way of achieving economic sustainability in the medium- to long-term, thanks to what Bertram & Watters define as 'aid entitlement', based partly on donor's recognition of the special problems related to being small and isolated, as well as, more importantly, geopolitical calculations. Maintaining a sustained level of support is unavoidable unless donor countries 'are prepared to see living standards slide in their former or actual dependencies; or unless they are prepared to be supplanted by other, competing, aid donors' (Bertram & Watters, 1985, p. 513).¹⁰ In this context, aid can be assimilated to a rent such as oil revenues and is often not conducive to increased self-sustainability, at least in part due to the fact that 'returns on investments in some of these economies are low or negative' (Tisdell, 2016, p. 12).

Fundamentally, as pointed out by Connell (1991, p. 271), 'it is no accident that the initial formulation of the MIRAB concept incorporated both politically independent island states and dependent territories. Political independence was not a significant variable.' In line with this approach, well established in the scholarship on small islands (e.g. Levine & Roberts, 2005; Bertram, 2006, p. 7; McElroy & Parry, 2012) and partially independent territories (Rezvani, 2014, 2016), this article compares directly different jurisdictions that share a number of features, irrespective of their status.¹¹ The relative insularity of de facto states and their external dependence is largely a consequence of the conflict that led to their establishment, and the ensuing lack of international recognition. Since neither territorial reintegration or widespread international recognition seem to be forthcoming, for analytical purposes such attributes are taken as structural features of these entities.

The next sections present the affinities between post-Soviet de facto states and small dependent jurisdictions around the globe, with explicit references to Pacific island states, focusing in particular on their attitude towards independence, their relationship with a patron, and how these aspects largely determine their political economy.

Upside down decolonisation

The process of decolonisation as initially formalized in UN documents and practice reinforced the idea that self-determination struggles are inextricably connected with independence movements, and that 'all potential countries would become independent if they could' (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012, p. 556). The wording of the 'Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples' (UN General Assembly, 1960) highlighted that all power must be transferred to the people of non-self-governing and dependent territories 'in order to enable them to enjoy complete independence and freedom.'¹² Later UN documents, however, made clear that independence is not the only legitimate option for such territories: 'the establishment of a sovereign and independent state, the free association or integration with an independent state or the emergence into any other political status freely determined by a people constitute modes of implementing the right of self-determination by that people' (UN General Assembly, 1970).

After the first wave of decolonization, many territories around the world that were given a chance to claim full independence and could in all fairness expect speedy international recognition declined to pursue this option. On the contrary, 'most of these jurisdictions have decided that they would rather retain some aspects of autonomy while maintaining or

seeking better terms of integration with their metropolitan/colonial power' (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012, p. 557). For example, many referenda have been held in the Caribbean since 1967 (Bermuda, US Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Bonaire, Sint Maartin, Saba, Curaçao, St. Eustatius), but none of them supported independence (Clegg, 2012). Island jurisdictions from the Pacific Ocean (Levine, 2012) to Northern Europe (Ackrén & Lindström, 2012; Kuokkanen, 2017), for one reason or another, have refused to take the path of full independence.¹³ Quite simply, to quote Rezvani (2016), 'partial independence beats full independence.'

As argued by Baldacchino and Hepburn (2012, pp. 557–558), 'the benefits of maintaining a form of association with a larger state (be it "free association" or "sovereignty-association") often outweigh the risks associated with complete separation,' in particular if the patron state is 'keen to maintain the smaller unit within its purview, would be disposed to support its wards with welfare, employment, security, investment and other benefits, perhaps even citizenship.' This has led to a pattern of behaviour known as 'upside down decolonization' (Baldacchino, 2010), i.e. dependent territories conspiring to maintain and extend colonial relationships rather than seeking full independence.

In some cases, island jurisdictions chose to give up some of their self-rule in exchange for becoming formally part of their patron and former colonial master in all respects. For example, in a 2009 referendum held on the island of Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, voters overwhelmingly chose to become a French Department, rather than remaining an overseas collectivity.¹⁴ This choice implied direct applicability of French legislation on the territory, further limiting self-rule. This means, for example, that traditional Islamic law previously applied on the island is due to be phased out in favour of French civil code and that polygamy is to be outlawed, but it also paved the way for more direct transfers and financial support from both the European Union and the French government, including social payments and unemployment benefits for local residents (Chrisafis, 2009).

External assistance and economic sustainability

In order to survive and to provide to a resident population a degree of security, public goods and services, small dependent jurisdictions around the world seek and obtain external assistance, often through formalised long-term agreements. In order to provide an example of how such arrangements are defined, the following paragraphs focus in particular on the Compact of Free Association that the United States have established with three Pacific

micro-states: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau. Agreements established between patrons and both sovereign and non sovereign small dependent jurisdictions from the Pacific to the Caribbean are based on similar key components (security guarantees, freedom of movement, technical assistance and financial support); adding details from other cases would add more nuances and demonstrate the variety of agreements to be found across world regions, but would not add substantially to the comparison at the basis of this article.¹⁵

In the case of Micronesia, Marshall Islands and Palau, 'free association' was eventually chosen over a number of alternative options, including that of becoming 'territories' of the United States (such as American Samoa) and that of obtaining commonwealth status (such as Puerto Rico or Northern Mariana).¹⁶ Marshall Islands and Palau were also offered to merge with Micronesia in 1978, but they refused. Unlike the other options outlined, free association provides for full constitutional independence and the establishment of a separate citizenship, even if it still implies a sovereignty sharing agreement. Eventually, Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau have all become UN member states between 1991 and 1994, in spite of the fact that initially the US government believed they would not qualify for UN membership because of their effectively limited independence.¹⁷

The three island states are required to consult with the United States on matters of security under both the Compact and the mutual security subsidiary agreement (Michal, 1993, pp. 320–321). They do not have an own army, as their security is guaranteed from the United States, but local residents are eligible to serve in the American armed forces. They also do not have an own currency: all of them use the US dollar as their official currency. Freedom of movement, i.e. the possibility to live and work in the United States without visa requirements or other impediments, is another key component of the Compacts.

All of these agreements include a financial component. According to the Compact between the United States and the Marshall Islands, for example, financial support 'shall be used for assistance in education, health care, the environment, public sector capacity building, and private sector development, or for other areas as mutually agreed, with priorities in the education and health care sectors' (US Department of State, 2003, sec. 211a).¹⁸ Between 30 and 50 per cent of annual grant assistance from the US is allocated to build and maintain public infrastructure (US Department of State, 2003, sec. 211d). In theory, the Compacts state that the purpose of the grant funds is to assist the governments of these Pacific micro-states 'in their efforts to promote the economic self-sufficiency and budgetary self-reliance of

their people' (US Government Accountability Office, 2013, p. 1); financial support is due to decrease and local authorities have to produce a 'Decrement Management Plan' outlining how they are preparing for running their governance activities without external funding. However, substantial financing has been established for the long term (in 2003, the amended Compacts provided for 3.6 billion USD in assistance to Micronesia and the Marshall Islands over 20 years, or about 1,200 USD per year per person),¹⁹ and trust funds have been established in order to provide additional resources after the financial provisions of the Compacts expire. Even so, it seems likely that an additional extension of the funding will be required (as it has been extended after the original termination of the Compacts in 1999). Also, it should be highlighted that the non-financial parts of the Compacts do not have a termination date: military cooperation, technical assistance and overall support are expected to continue indefinitely.

For these jurisdictions, the pragmatic security and economic advantages of establishing a Compact with the United States are clear.²⁰ However, the kind of relationship they established with the United States, rather than fostering structural economic development and self-sustainability, effectively brought these countries closer to the so-called MIRAB model (Bertram & Watters, 1985).

Post-Soviet de facto states: not so different?

In recent years, Russia has increasingly formalised its assistance to post-Soviet de facto states.²¹ For example, in December 2014 Russia and Abkhazia have formalized relations through a treaty of 'alliance and strategic partnership' that in key aspects resembles the associated status of small island states.²²

The treaty (Kremlin.ru, 2014) establishes a coordinated foreign and security policy (art. 4-5), and highlights that a common position is to be agreed in all important matters related to security. A joint military force is to be established (art. 5); in case of aggression, the Russian Federation is to head this joint force (art. 7). In order to facilitate joint operations, the Abkhazian armed forces are to be modernized and adapt to Russian standards of operation; all related expenses are to be paid by the Russian Federation (art. 8). According to the treaty, public servants working for the ministry of interior (art. 10), as well as people working in a number of sectors (health, education, science, culture, sport and social services) and pensioners with Russian citizenship are due to have their incomes increased to the level found in Russia's southern federal district (art. 14). Health (art. 17) and education (art. 20)

are to be brought in line with the quality standards set in the Russian Federation. Some benefits included in the treaty, such as an increase in the pensions and access to health care in Russia, are meant only for residents of Abkhazia with Russian citizenship; however, this seems to be based on the assumption that double Abkhazian-Russian citizenship is the norm, rather than the exception. Besides, Russia is to facilitate the procedure for obtaining Russian citizenship for citizens of Abkhazia (art. 13). The treaty also includes provisions that address key goals of the local leadership in Abkhazia, including support to efforts for strengthening Abkhaz language use (art. 21) and an obligation to take measures aimed at extending Abkhazia's international contacts, including by facilitating its membership in international organizations and its international recognition as a sovereign state (art. 4).

A largely similar treaty has also been signed between Russia and South Ossetia (Kremlin.ru, 2015), even if its different title (treaty of 'alliance and integration', rather than 'alliance and strategic partnership') is a clear sign of its diverging long term goals. Even in the case of Transnistria, which has not been recognised by the Russian Federation as an independent country, a number of both formal and informal agreements have in practice similar effects: security guarantees, financial contributions to increase the incomes of public servants and pensioners, as well as technical support in a number of fields. Formal agreements between ministries of the Russian Federation and relevant authorities in Transnistria provide for technical support across the spectrum of government activities, including health, education, finance, trade, economic development, anti-monopoly legislation, transportation, culture, and others (President of Transnistria, 2014). Reconstruction or construction of social infrastructure, including kindergartens, schools and hospitals is being openly financed by the Russian government in the form of humanitarian support through a dedicated non-commercial organization, 'Eurasian integration.'

Post-Soviet de facto states and MIRAB

Can post-Soviet de facto states be considered MIRAB economies? While reliable data on migration and remittances are missing or not publicly available for all cases, both anecdotal evidence and previous research suggest that outbound migration is substantial in all post-Soviet de facto states, with the partial exception of post-2008 Abkhazia.²³ In reference to other components of the MIRAB model, available data strongly suggest that external aid and public workers' wages are a fundamental, and even dominant part of the local economy in all four de facto jurisdictions discussed in this study.

According to statistics issued by de facto authorities, in the period 2012-2015, about 90 per cent of incomes to South Ossetia's budget, and more than 50 per cent of Abkhazia's, came from Moscow, even without considering assistance coming in the form of pensions paid directly by the Russian pension fund to local residents.²⁴ In the case of Nagorno Karabakh, the 'interstate credit' (the formula officially used to refer to transfers from the Armenian government to Stepanakert) routinely covered for more than 55 per cent of Stepanakert's budget for the same period (Comai, 2017, p. 11). In Transnistria, comparable data are not issued, yet local authorities do not keep hidden their structural dependence on external support; in 2013, then president Evgeny Shevchuk (2013) stated that with its own resources Transnistria is able to 'cover for about 20-25 per cent of the state functions.'

Statistical offices in post-Soviet de facto states routinely issue data related to employment of their residents. Adding pensioners to state employees, it emerges that in each of the de facto states in the South Caucasus over 80 per cent of residents with registered monetary income are either public sector employees or pensioners (Abkhazia's office of state statistics, 2015; National statistical service of Nagorno Karabakh, 2015; Sputnik Osetiya, 2016; Pension Fund of the Russian Federation, 2016; Comai, 2017, p. 12). In Transnistria, the corresponding figure is close to 75 per cent (Transnistria's Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Even allowing for substantial inaccuracies, considering that the figures on state employees and pensioners are due to be largely accurate, it appears that in line with the MIRAB model an unusually high share of residents in post-Soviet de facto states receive their income from the budget (and thus, indirectly, largely thanks to external assistance to these entities).

In spite of a global and regional economic crisis, starting with 2008, Russia's support has helped maintaining relatively stable living standards in Transnistria, and increasing them in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, similarly to what happens in MIRAB economies, 'living standards have been driven up by rent incomes rather than by expanding productive incomes, [...] [and as a consequence] it is inescapably true that the real disposable incomes of the resident populations [...] are sustainable only if their current-account rent entitlements are in their turn sustainable' (Bertram & Watters, 1985, p. 510).

In the case of de facto states, this does not mean that Abkhazia, for example, is not capable *in principle* to be economically self-sustainable, but rather that the level of welfare, public salaries and development that has been achieved in recent years thanks to Russia's assistance is unlikely to be attainable without that support in the foreseeable future. It should be highlighted that, in a way, Russia's support is making it more and more difficult for Abkhazia

to be self-sustainable. Stability and opening of borders with Russia, combined with increased fiscal capacity by authorities in Sukhumi, may have allowed to progressively improve on public services, pensions and salaries from their level pre-Russian intervention, but the terms of the Abkhazia-Russia treaty set such payments at a level that authorities in Sukhumi will not be able to cover independently in the foreseeable future.²⁵

Similarly, Transnistria is unlikely to be able to maintain its current level of public expenditures and in particular its current level of pension payments (on average, as of 2015, twice as big as those of Moldova or Ukraine) without external support. Nagorno Karabakh would not be able to maintain its current level of public services without financial support from Armenia and the wider Armenian diaspora. In line with the MIRAB model, in post-Soviet de facto states 'subsistence remains attainable, and resources available to the village mode of production are sufficient to guarantee the basic needs of the population' (Bertram & Watters, 1985, p. 511), providing a baseline below which the local economy would not go even in absence of external support. However, a sudden decrease of external support from the patron would likely result in a new wave of (at least seasonal) outward migration, as recorded in some MIRAB economies (Fraenkel, 2006, p. 18).

Such considerations, however, should not distract from the basic idea at the basis of the MIRAB model, i.e. that the sustainability of these jurisdictions is in practice related to the sustainability of their 'aid entitlements' rather than on domestic capacities. As long as Russia believes that supporting these entities is an important element for its overall strategy in its near abroad, it is unlikely that Russia will give up completely economic support to these territories, leaving them destitute and further depopulated. Similarly, it seems highly unlikely that Armenia or the Armenian diaspora would suddenly stop their support for Nagorno Karabakh. In brief, as established examples of MIRAB economies and post-Soviet de facto states both show, economic sustainability does not necessarily mean self-sustainability.

Sustainably dependent?

Jurisdictions that are given the possibility to obtain full independence and can expect to see their desire respected at the international level decline to pursue the path to full sovereignty for pragmatic reasons, and rather prefer to enjoy the economic and practical benefits of keeping close ties with a wealthier patron. It is thus hardly surprising that post-Soviet de facto states strive to strengthen ties with their patron rather than opting for some idealistic independence with no patron to support and defend them, in particular considering the fact

that they lack resources for financial self-sustainability and see their security under constant threat. Similarly to other small-sized territories highly dependent on a single patron, post-Soviet de facto states are pragmatically trying to have the best of both worlds, by keeping

all (or most) of the ceremonial, symbolic, regulatory and operational trappings of sovereignty, plus a much stronger ally in the corner for those delicate occasions that warrant a display of force or influence, a source of economic largesse, a pool of potential tourists, a custodian of a lucrative and diverse labour market, an appealing location for pursuing higher education, and purveyor of prized citizenship rights (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012, p. 561).²⁶

Such insistence on pragmatism is partially at odds with a long-established characterisation by Lynch (2004, p. 63), according to whom 'de facto states are driven first and foremost by political, not economic, imperatives.' It may be true that indeed politics comes first, ruling out options such as integration with the parent state or a total dismantling of the structures of self-government that have been established after the conflict. But if security and economic benefits can be coupled by a politically acceptable association with a patron, self-reliant independence effectively stops being an attractive alternative.²⁷

Thinking of post-Soviet de facto states as small, dependent jurisdictions building a relationship with their patron that may continue to exist in the current configuration for decades to come, rather than as transient phenomena due to be re-integrated with their parent state, may contribute to appreciate more effectively the dynamics that take place in these territories, as well as their international interactions. Especially in earlier years of studies on de facto states, scholars have focused on various avenues for surpassing the current status issue by looking at some form or another of integration with the parent state (Chirikba, 2000; Coppieters et al., 2004; Geldenhuys, 2009; Potier, 2001).²⁸ Yet, at least in part for normative reasons, little attention has been dedicated to how these territories may develop further their integration with their patron, even when this trend became more apparent.

This is not unlike what happened in the study of island jurisdictions. For example, according to Jong and Kruijt (2005, p. 4), scholars of dependent territories in the Caribbean have long 'focused on how to move forward to "more sovereignty", or how to advance constitutional development, meaning more autonomy, or how to arrive as close as possible to an almost independent nation-state status', even when empirically these jurisdictions were on the contrary striving to retain and reinforce strong forms of association with their patron. The

long-term prospect most debated in academic literature is inverse to that about de facto states (i.e. a move towards full independence and sovereignty in the case of Caribbean island states versus integration with the parent state for de facto states), but the approaches outlined here share a common problem: a pre-conceived expectation about the long-term development path of territories whose status does not fit clearly the dualistic logic according to which 'there are states and there is little else' (Lynch, 2004, p. xi) hinders focused research on currently prevalent dynamics on the ground.

Finally, the debate on the sustainability of de facto states has been centred around an idea of economic self-sufficiency that is rarely found in small dependent territories. In spite of the fact that both the patron and local authorities may find it convenient to maintain rhetorically self-sustainability as a final goal, in practice, it should not be excluded that, as argued by Bertram (1986, p. 809), "'dependent development" is both sustainable and preferable to a drive for self-reliance.' Even if being small and dependent on a patron may sound less glorious than being self-sufficient and fully independent, conceptualising de facto states as dependent jurisdictions does not imply any judgement on their legitimacy, or their claims to self-determination and statehood.

Limitations of the comparison and new venues of research

This article solidly focuses on similarities between distant jurisdictions that, as has been highlighted, share a number of features, without explicitly discussing the all too apparent differences. This selective approach, which has previously been employed by scholars working on the post-Soviet space in order to break out of the boundaries of area studies,²⁹ does not aim at discounting geography (in particular, the actual remoteness of many island jurisdictions, and the physical distance between them and their patron), or the different histories and cultures that pertain to small dependent jurisdictions in different world regions. Instead, it points at sectors in which – in spite of all the differences – analytical approaches developed in the context of small dependent jurisdictions may contribute to our understanding of post-Soviet de facto states.

This juxtaposition, however, has important limitations. For example, highlighting that both sets of jurisdictions are not striving towards fully-fledged independence does not imply that they are facing choices on status in similar conditions. Indeed, unlike post-Soviet de facto states, many other small dependent jurisdictions were actually given the possibility to head towards sovereign independence, and detach themselves from their former colonial master. In

recent decades, irrespective of the formal international status achieved by these jurisdictions, they instead mostly sought to adjust, retain, and sometimes reinforce ties with a patron. As the alternative was in many cases economic deprivation, this choice can hardly be characterised as fully free. Yet, they were arguably open-ended debates based on democratic consultations, even if they took place in circumstances that were less than ideal.³⁰ In the case of post-Soviet de facto states, non-sovereignty is the outcome of conflict dynamics and prevalent international norms, not a 'rational and pragmatic' choice based on a cost-benefit analysis, which is a popular albeit not unproblematic narrative used to explain the outcome of status debates in small dependent jurisdictions (Veenendaal, 2016, p. 153). Yet, it is argued, awareness of the experience of small dependent jurisdictions around the globe can usefully contribute to our understanding of prevalent dynamics in post-Soviet de facto states, including in reference to the sustained preference among a majority of residents for close ties with their patron (Toal & O'Loughlin 2016).

Besides, the fact that the dynamics that generated and sustain the patron-client relationship in these different sets of territories are fundamentally dissimilar does not preclude the applicability to post-Soviet de facto states of approaches established in the study of small dependent jurisdictions. This article has preliminarily explored the applicability of the MIRAB model to post-Soviet de facto states. While the model is in itself descriptive, further research aimed at observing the accuracy and the shortcomings of MIRAB in the context of post-Soviet de facto states may inform in-depth analysis on one of the long-standing questions on post-Soviet de facto states (e.g. Kolstø 2006): how do these entities sustain themselves? Approaching this question through the prism of MIRAB allows to fully acknowledge the importance of the patron, but also to explore local dynamics that enable the sustained existence of these entities and fundamentally contribute to shape their political economy. Awareness of criticism to the MIRAB model (Bertram, 1999, pp. 113-115) contributes to avoid potential pitfalls, or at least to include them in the analytical process (e.g. does MIRAB's focus on macro-economic aspects effectively misrepresent prevalent dynamics on the ground? does MIRAB discount too easily the potential for domestic economic development?).

Finally, conceptualising post-Soviet de facto states as small dependent jurisdictions provides inputs well beyond economic aspects. For example, research on elections and democratic processes in de facto states may find it useful to refer to literature on democracy in very small polities. Relevant studies show that micro-states tend to be more democratic than bigger states (Anckar, 2008), but also point at the prevalence of personalistic politics

(Veenendaal, 2013), at the dominance of the executive government, at lack of checks and balances, and at widespread nepotism and pork barrel politics (Baldacchino 2012b, p. 107). Other features of the political context of post-Soviet de facto states (largely associated with post-conflict dynamics) are also found in small dependent jurisdictions that have not experienced conflict. For example, Baldacchino (2012b, p. 109) argues that in small island societies there is frequently 'a set of homogeneous values [...] to which significant social players conform and subscribe (at least in public)'; in the case of non-compliance, 'the threat of ostracism is immense.' Tapping into the scholarship on small jurisdictions may contribute to point at some of the ways in which smallness interacts with perceived external threats to shape public discourse and political competition in post-Soviet de facto states.

More broadly, as investigations on post-Soviet de facto states involve an increasingly diverse range of subjects, conceptualising post-Soviet de facto states as small dependent jurisdictions contributes to offer relevant terms of comparison to a literature that has so far struggled with finding them. Pointing out that entities such as Taiwan and Nagorno Karabakh may not really be comparable, Seymour (Closson, Kolstø, Seymour, & Caspersen, 2013, pp. 679–680) argued that 'the study of de facto states needs to move beyond the narrow focus on a heterogeneous set of unrecognised states', since

such territories share the absence of external recognition, but their dissimilarities in most every other respect make it difficult to parse out the effects that non-recognition has on processes such as democratization, state building, and legitimation. The absence of international legal sovereignty affects these processes, to be sure, but other factors often have far greater effects.

This article answers this call by suggesting that small size and external dependence may indeed be such factors.

Conclusions

This article draws upon the comparison between post-Soviet de facto states and small dependent jurisdictions in other parts of the world in order to propose a re-conceptualization of these entities for analytical purposes. The main conclusion is that in order to understand the processes that take place in these territories, their political economy, and their external relations, it may be useful to conceptualize these entities primarily as small dependent jurisdictions. Lack of recognition is clearly a defining feature of their place in the international system, but this should not obscure other structural characteristics of these

entities. Acknowledging smallness and external dependence as key features of post-Soviet de facto states allows to introduce new instruments and approaches from an apparently distant literature to the analytical toolbox of scholars working on these entities, providing new venues for research and adjusting expectations about their path of development and long term objectives. In particular, this conceptualisation suggests that there should be no expectation that full-fledged, internationally recognised independence must be the final goal of post-Soviet de facto states. In the post-decolonization period, small dependent territories inhabited by distinct populations around the world have by and large preferred to keep close relations with a patron and establish sovereignty sharing agreements rather than seek internationally recognised independence. Post-Soviet de facto states are no exception, and, as a consequence, a requirement of seeking independence should not be part of the criteria for defining a de facto state.

As emerges from the literature on small dependent jurisdictions, sustainability, rather than self-sustainability, is key for the survival of these entities. The observation that post-Soviet de facto states are not self-sufficient, or that reliance on domestic capabilities would drive their resident population to an economy of subsistence, is ultimately not relevant for understanding their economic sustainability. Authorities of small dependent jurisdictions with no realistic hope for self-reliant development have managed to provide stability as well as a degree of welfare and public services to their resident population for decades in spite of almost total lack of domestic resources. More in general, research on the economy and sustainability of post-Soviet de facto states may benefit of observations developed by researchers working on small dependent jurisdictions elsewhere in the world. Thorough testing of the various components of the MIRAB model, as well as further research on some of the issues that have featured in research on small dependent jurisdictions in other contexts (e.g. the impact of aid volatility), may open new venues of research and enhance our understanding of prevalent dynamics in post-Soviet de facto states.

Finally, it should be highlighted that this conceptualization is not exclusive, but rather complementary to established characterizations of post-Soviet de facto states focused on their contested international status and (post-)conflict dimensions.³¹ Conceptualising de facto states as small dependent jurisdictions allows to appreciate the relative normalcy of their external dependence,³² of their key relations with a patron, and the legitimacy of choosing close relations and further integration with a patron as an expression of self-determination,³³ be it determined by pragmatic reasons or simply lack of viable alternatives. Accordingly, it aims at reducing the impact of geopolitical assumptions and normative expectations about

their long-term path of development by re-shifting the focus on issue-based research that takes in consideration the inevitable inter-relation between internal and external dimensions.³⁴

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- 1 As acknowledged by various scholars (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011, p. 179, note 4; O'Loughlin, Kolossov, & Toal, 2014, p. 494), there has been a growing consensus on 'de facto state' over competing expressions 'referring to essentially the same thing' (Pegg, 2017, p. 16). As will be argued, for most purposes, a minimalist definition of de facto state that does not include references to what an entity 'seeks' or 'aspires to' such as the one proposed by Ó Beacháin, Comai, & Tsursumia-Zurabashvili (2016, p. 442) is to be preferred: de facto states 'can be concisely defined as entities that have achieved and maintained internal sovereignty over an area for an extended period, with a degree of internal legitimacy but only limited formal recognition at the international level, or none at all.' For an extended debate of alternative definitions of the concept, see Toomla (2014, pp. 33–58); for an overview of scholarship on de facto states see in particular Pegg (2017).
- 2 Scientific surveys conducted in post-Soviet de facto states confirm that integration with the patron is preferred over sovereign independence by residents of post-Soviet de facto states (O'Loughlin, Toal, & Chamberlain-Creangă, 2013; O'Loughlin et al., 2014; Toal & O'Loughlin, 2017, p. 18). Only in Abkhazia independence was the first choice for most residents (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, & Toal, 2011). However, while it is true that 'for Abkhazia the long-term goal is genuine sovereignty, and ongoing integration processes with Russia are an unavoidable tactical concession' (Broers, 2015), it should be highlighted that even staunch supporters of Abkhazia's independence favour very close ties with Russia, including sovereignty sharing agreements on fundamental matters such as defence.
- 3 Empirically, this trend is particularly noticeable in areas such as the Caribbean, where islands in some form of association with a patron are located in proximity (and in sharp contrast in terms of wealth and welfare) with independent sovereign states.
- 4 This article specifically focuses on the so-called 'Eurasian quartet', which has previously been object of separate study (Geldenhuys, 2009, pp. 67-106; Lynch, 2004; Markedonov, 2012). DNR and LNR, emerged from conflict in Ukraine in 2014, have not been included because their political economy has only recently started to take shape. Some of the observations presented in this article may however well apply to them, as well as to other de facto states, including a case such as Northern Cyprus which clearly fits the definition of 'small dependent jurisdiction' presented below.
- 5 Considering that the main security threats to small island jurisdictions often relate to natural disasters and rising sea levels, rather than to military aggression from a parent state as is the case of post-Soviet de facto states, comparing studies on security dynamics in these different contexts is unlikely to generate meaningful insights.
- 6 'PITs can be defined (and distinguished from other forms) by their nationalistically distinct populations, their constitutionally unincorporated status, and their entrenched powers that they divide and share with a sovereign (core) state. They also possess most powers over their domestic

affairs, some powers over foreign policy, but no powers over the external use of the military' (Rezvani, 2016, p. 271).

- 7 A review of the definitions of state size used in the literature between 1957 and 1999 (Crowards, 2002, p. 177) shows cutting points mostly based on population size ranging from 250,000 to one million. The four post-Soviet de facto states included in this study, as well as the Pacific island states chosen as main terms of comparison, have all less than 500,000 inhabitants.
- 8 This excludes jurisdictions which are recipients of assistance for a determinate period within the scope of governance delegation agreements, i.e. 'international treaties allowing external actors legal authority within host states for fixed terms' (Matanock, 2014, p. 589).
- 9 The concept of MIRAB was initially developed in reference to Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Kiribati, and Tuvalu, but has later been applied to dozens of both sovereign and non-sovereign jurisdictions; various adaptations of the model have been introduced to describe more accurately the situation empirically found in contexts where tourism or financial services have become important pillars of the local economy (Bertram, 2006).
- 10 Bertram & Watters place their reasoning solidly in the de-colonization context; references to colonialism, albeit not totally out of place in the post-Soviet space, are intentionally omitted here in order to make the model they propose more adaptable to the cases at the centre of this article.
- 11 The status-neutral term 'jurisdiction' employed throughout this article reflects this choice, and has previously been used in reference to post-Soviet de facto states (Broers, 2015, p. 285). Berg and Kuusk (2010) have also included dependent territories among terms of comparison for de facto states.
- 12 For a further debate on self-determination and independence claims in this context, see in particular Fabry (2015).
- 13 Lack of economic resources seems to be a major factor, even in wealthy northern Europe: 'The main stumbling block on the road to Faroese and Greenlandic statehood is that the islands would lose their financial support from Denmark. [...] Neither of the two islands, at least in the near future, will be able to fully assume the financial responsibilities that statehood requires.' (Ackrén & Lindström, 2012, p. 506).
- 14 A somewhat similar development took place with the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles, and with its smaller islands – Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba – becoming 'special municipalities of the Netherlands, and [...] hence politically and constitutionally integrated into the Dutch metropolis' (Veenendaal, 2015).
- 15 For a debate on shared sovereignty in French territories in the Pacific, see in particular Mrgudovic (2012); for Dutch jurisdictions in the Caribbean see Oostindie (2006).
- 16 For an overview of the process, see in particular McKibben (1990).

- 17 In reply to a question by the Congress, the US government replied officially that '[i]n the view of the United States, the Freely Associated States, while having sovereignty and full self-government, will not possess the attributes of independence called for in the eligibility criteria of the United Nations Charter' (United States Congress, 1984, p. 109).
- 18 Details about grant assistance change slightly among the Compacts, but the focus remains broadly similar.
- 19 Substantive additional non-compact grants have also been offered: 'For example, in fiscal years 2007 through 2011, the FSM spent about 197 million USD and the RMI spent about 46 million USD in non-compact grants from agencies including Interior, Education, HHS, Labor, and the Department of Transportation' (US Government Accountability Office, 2013, p. 10), averaging to about additional 320 USD per year per resident. The relationship is not always smooth, and issues of mismanagement and reporting have caused delays in funding allocations from the United States (Labriola, 2016, p. 198).
- 20 However, it should not be assumed that the Compacts are not contested. Hinck (1990) made explicitly reference to 'economic coercion' by the United States in his characterisation of the process that led to the Compact of Free Association that opened the way for Palau's formal independence. A referendum in Palau needed for approving the Compact had to be conducted eight times before finally passing in 1993. Smith-Norris (2016) presented the relationship between the United States and the Marshall Islands as one of 'domination and resistance', in particular in reference to the recriminations related to the nuclear tests conducted by the US in the Bikini atoll.
- 21 Armenia, and not Russia, is the patron in the case of Nagorno Karabakh; in spite of the fact that Armenia does not recognise Nagorno Karabakh's independence, authorities in Yerevan actively interact with institutions in Stepanakert and officially provide financial support. The Armenian diaspora substantially complements Yerevan's assistance (Adriaans, 2017).
- 22 While the increased role of Russia is frequently object of debate in Abkhazia, it should be highlighted that it is not in contrast with long-standing claims to self-determination by Abkhazia's de facto authorities or a last minute capitulation to Russian pressures. On the contrary, already in 2003 Abkhazia's minister of foreign affairs Sergei Shamba (2003) was happy to consider Abkhazia a Russian protectorate and mentioned the Marshall Islands as a positive example of how Abkhazia-Russia relations may develop. In 2003, Abkhazia's parliament formally proposed to Russia's federal assembly to establish an associated relationship (IA Regnum, 2003); the proposed partnership has clear elements of commonality with the treaty eventually signed in December 2014.
- 23 See for example the research by Volkova and Ostavnaya (2015) on migration and remittances in Transnistria. The fact that countries such as Moldova and Armenia feature in the World Bank's list of 'Top remittance receiving countries' (World Bank, 2016, p. 13) along with MIRAB economies such as Tonga, Samoa and the Marshall Islands also suggests that Transnistria and Nagorno Karabakh are likely to have consistent incoming remittance flows.

- 24 Russia has been providing this level of support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia only starting with 2008. With the expansion of Russian assistance, similarly to what happened in some island micro-states, 'the structure of the economy has been transformed from subsistence toward subsidy' (Connell, 1991, p. 271).
- 25 For example, as of 2015, the median Abkhazian pension amounted to less than 10 USD per month, while the average pensions paid by Russia in Abkhazia amounts to more than 100 USD per month. In order to be able to offer a comparable level of disbursement autonomously, Abkhazia would need a very considerable increase in its capacity to finance its own budget as well as its social fund.
- 26 In fact, pragmatic considerations of this kind are not unique to small island states. The 'devo max' option that according to opinion polls would have been the preferred option in an independence referendum in Scotland if it was included on the referendum ballot paper (Sharp, Cumbers, Painter, & Wood, 2014, p. 37) shows that also the electorate of a developed democratic country would have been willing to take, in its own way, 'the best of both worlds.'
- 27 This line of reasoning has some elements of commonality with the argument originally brought forward by King (2001), who highlighted that political and economic incentives benefiting multiple interest groups (all the way from elites to pensioners) are a key factor in determining the endurance of the status quo in post-Soviet de facto states. The shady business schemes that were central to King's characterisation fifteen years ago, however, for the most part gave way to a structure of benefits stemming from a largely formalised patron-client relationship.
- 28 Even an edited book on the subject that aimed to allow 'such entities to be viewed as, if not "regular" features of the international system, at least ones of a more perennial rather than anomalous nature' (Caspersen & Stansfield, 2011, p. 20), concludes with a chapter that focuses on options for reintegration with the parent state and explicitly refuses to take in consideration prolonged existence in their current status or further integration with the patron as plausible options (L. Anderson, 2011, p. 195).
- 29 Introducing his comparison between post-Soviet central Asia and Francophone Africa, Gammer (2000) made a point that applies also to the present study: '[this article] does not attempt to compare the states and societies of the two groups. The differences between, and indeed within each of the two groups are too numerous and obvious.' In their introduction to a book comparing state crisis in Africa and in post-Soviet countries, Beissinger and Young (2002, p. 5) made a similar point: candidly admitting that they 'anticipate that for some readers the Africa-Eurasia juxtaposition [...] will seem odd given the enormous differences in the histories and cultures of the two regions', they argued that 'the utility of any comparison can be measured only by the degree to which it generates new and meaningful ideas' (Beissinger & Young, 2002, p. 12). Isachenko and Schlichte (2007) implicitly followed their advice when they compared 'crooked ways of state-building' in Uganda and Transnistria.

- 30 Focusing in particular on status debates in the Dutch Caribbean, Veenendaal (2016) questions how much such consultations effectively reflect the informed preference of residents of these small polities.
- 31 For example, a focus on post-Soviet de facto states' viability in terms of post-conflict violence (Bakke, 2011), is complementary, rather than in contrast to, considerations on their viability based on aid entitlement.
- 32 This “normalcy” does not imply that external dependence and growing integration are universally welcomed in these territories. On the contrary, ambivalent feelings towards the patron are common, for example, in Abkhazia (O'Loughlin et al., 2011), as they are in some small dependent territories around the world that are constantly trying to adjust their asymmetric relation with their patron.
- 33 Claims to self-determination within a given territory, however, are still particularly problematic in those cases where ethnic cleansing led to significant changes in the demographic outlook of the territory object of self-determination claims.
- 34 In other words, frequent references to the importance of external actors throughout this article should not be understood as favouring a reductionist approach that ignores internal dynamics, which are fundamental in determining the outcome of state-building efforts. See also Caspersen (2012, p. 76).