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Maximilian Ohle

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

With a foreword by Andrey Makarychev

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Foreword

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

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

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

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

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

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September 2025

1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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