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Competing Epistemologies in Contested Spaces

Knowledge Production on ‘De Facto States’ in English and Russian Language Academic Literature

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Abstract

In Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, competitive regional integration frameworks—most notably the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union—have been institutionalised. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has further intensified the geopolitical rivalry, particularly as Moldova and Georgia joined Ukraine in obtaining EU candidate status. Despite this deepening competition at the regional level, little attention has been paid to its impact on knowledge production in international relations (IR), especially regarding entities often labelled as de facto states—whose status remains contested and whose conceptual framing is debated. Although comprehensive reviews of de facto states' studies, including those emerging from the end of the Soviet Union, exist (e.g., Broers 2013; Pegg 2017), these accounts overwhelmingly rely on English-language Western scholarship. The limited engagement with Russian-language sources, including the perspectives of scholars based in the places analysed, has been criticised as indicative of Western epistemic bias (Yemelianova 2015). This criticism reflects broader concerns within international relations (IR) regarding epistemological hierarchies and the marginalisation of non-Western knowledge production.

This paper adopts a comparative perspective to analyse knowledge production by Western and Russian(-language) scholars on four case studies: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. Adopting a decentring perspective, it also explores the scholarship produced within these regions. Drawing on a systematic literature review and theoretical concepts such as epistemic communities, regimes of truth, and speech acts (Foucault 1980), the paper interrogates the relationship between knowledge and power, while attempting to critically distance itself from Eurocentric assumptions.

Findings reveal broad alignments between Western scholarship and European politics on the one hand, and Russian-language scholarship and Russian political narratives on the other, particularly in relation to sovereignty claims. Notably, however, Russian-language scholars often continue to categorise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as de facto states despite Russia's formal recognition since 2008, illustrating a divergence in terminological usage. In the concluding discussion, the paper highlights the epistemic contributions of scholars writing from within, particularly in Abkhazia and Transnistria, and calls for greater inclusion of these voices in global academic discourse.

Keywords

Knowledge production, de facto states, contested statehood, epistemic hierarchies, regimes of truth, Russian-language scholarship, regional integration, post-Soviet space, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transnistria

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1. Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 31, 1991, prompted a reconfiguration of borders and a redefinition of sovereignty, leaving several territorial delimitations contested. More than thirty years later, these disputes persist, further exacerbated since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In this context, knowledge production itself has come under increasing scrutiny, with scholars drawing attention to phenomena such as "Westsplaining" and coloniality in dominant narratives about the war in Ukraine (Hendl et al. 2023). Introduced by Quijano (1992) and Mignolo (2002) the concept of coloniality emphasises the enduring influence of colonial ways of thinking, even in the absence of formal colonial rule, including within academic circles. While often framed in North–South terms, coloniality also shapes West–East dynamics, particularly in knowledge production (Burlyuk and Musliu 2023; Koobak et al. 2021; Tlostanova 2017). By knowledge production, I refer to the process of generating ideas, insights, and understandings through research and reflection - a core activity in academia, and one also pursued by economic, political, and community actors. In the (social) sciences, this production often materialises in academic articles, books, and presentations at conferences, symposia, or workshops, and in dissemination activities to a wider audience.

Exposure to a specific set of discourses in public space shapes knowledge about the political status and territorial delimitation of four contested entities, namely, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. Even their names are contested: Nagorno-Karabakh is referred to as Artsakh by Armenians; Transnistria is termed the "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic" by its authorities, which banned, on September 4, the use of the name "Transnistria," stating that it refers to "the fascist and Nazi-era occupations, mass violence, and ethnic cleansing during World War II." This resulted in amendments to the laws on "combating extremist activity", the one on the "victory in the Great Patriotic War" and the Administrative Offences Code, punishing the use of any name other than "Pridnestrovie". In contrast, the Moldovan government refers to it as the "Transnistria region of Moldova", while representatives of international organisations call for "conflict-sensitive terminology", using Right and Left Bank of the Dniester River to name Moldova and Transnistria respectively. Using these latter terms in this working paper, I am mindful of their shortcomings and remain in search of a more suitable term, emphasising that any designation reflects the locutor's standpoint. In Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are considered territories under the Russian occupation, a designation formalised in Georgian legislation since 2008[1]. However, perspectives within these places differ: most residents in Abkhazia aspire to full independence, while many in South Ossetia seek closer ties or integration with Russia (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal [also Gearóid Ó Tuathail] 2014; Toal and O'Loughlin 2013; O'Loughlin et al. 2011). In this paper, I refer to these four territories by their most commonly used English names: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, while acknowledging that doing so inevitably reproduces some of the Western-centric biases I aim to interrogate.

Numerous terms have been used to describe these territories. Among the most widespread are "de facto states" (Bahcheli et al. 2004; Berg and Toomla 2009; Bakke et al. 2018; Berg and Vits 2018). Coined by Scott Pegg (1998) using the criteria of the Montevideo Convention (1933): a permanent population, defined territory, functioning government, and capacity for foreign relations. These territories lack the last criterion – formal recognition – and are thus considered de facto but not de jure states. Other labels abound, such as 'unrecognised state' (King 2001; Caspersen et al. 2013), 'pseudo-states' (V. Kolosov and O'Loughlin 1998), 'states within states' (Kingston and Spears 2004), 'para-states' (Baev 1998), 'quasi-states' (Kolstø 2006), 'phantom states' (Byman and King 2012), 'separatist states' (Lynch 2004), 'contested states' (Geldenhuys 2009), and 'informal states' (Isachenko 2012). The variety of terminology, summarised in the table below, reflects the lack of agreement on how to frame these entities, and I further reflect on the usage of these terms in English and Russian academic literature.

One may argue that the terminology debate is not so central, yet the absence of a consensual definition is identified as one of the four problems in "de facto state studies" from a Central European perspective (Kosienkowski 2022). Pål Kolstø (2022) attempted to structure what he framed as a 'terminological anarchy' through a typology along two axes: axiological (positive vs. negative valorisation) and spatial (inward vs. outward focus), concluding that 'de facto state' emerged as a relatively 'consensual term'. Yet, this term is not free from normative charge, as are terms such as "de facto authorities" or "occupation". In this paper, I aim to take a step back to critically reflect on the knowledge production, particularly by Western and Russian academics. I build here on the work of Galina Yemelianova (2015), who critiques the dominance of deductive, quantitative research and English-language secondary sources in Western scholarship on "de facto states" located in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

1 See the law of Georgia on occupied territories available in English here: https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/19132/5/en/pdf

Terms	Authors	Date	Discipline
De facto state	Pegg; Berg and Toomla; O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal; Yemelianova; Prelz Oltramonti; Kopeček, Hoch, and Baar; Dembińska and Campana; Berg and Vits; Comai; Ganohariti; Kosienkowski; Kolstø	1998 – 2009 – 2011,2014 & 2020 2015 – 2016 - 2017 - 2018 – 2020- 2022 - 2024	IR, area studies, political sciences
Unrecognised state	King; Cooley and Mitchell; Caspersen, Kolstø, Seymou, Closson; Ó Beacháin, Comai, and Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili	2001 – 2010 -2013 - 2016	IR – political sciences
Pseudo-states	V. Kolosov and O'Loughlin	1998	Geography
States within states	Kingston and Spears	2004	IR
Para-states	Baev	1998	Political sciences - IR
Quasi-states	Kolstø	2006	IR (Peace studies)
Phantom states	Byman and King	2012	Political sciences
Separatist states	Lynch	2004	IR
Contested states	Geldenhuys; Kursani; Grzybowski, Prelz Oltramonti, and Verdebout	2009, 2021, 2025	IR – legal studies
Informal states	Isachenko	2012	Political sciences

Thus, this paper aims first to document and comparatively analyse the type of knowledge Western and Russian academics have produced about Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, taking a critical look at the state-centric bias in both bodies of scholarship. Secondly, it attempts to situate this knowledge production within the broader regional context where our four cases are embedded. Since 2014, geopolitical tensions have intensified between the EU-led Eastern Partnership and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, a divide sharpened further by Russia's all-out war against Ukraine since February 24, 2022. I argue that this war has reactivated and reframed contested borders, as illustrated by the one between Georgia and Abkhazia (Le Pavic 2025b).

The case selection is based on a spatiotemporal criterion: all four entities were separated from independent post-Soviet Republics: Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, in the early 1990s. This excludes later formations such as the Russia-backed "Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics", which separated from Ukraine in 2014, as well as Crimea, which was annexed by Russia in 2014 and now functions as a de facto subject of the Russian Federation (Nuzov 2016). Other short-lived or less institutionally developed cases, such as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (1996–1999) and Gagauzia (1990–1995), are also excluded due to their temporal nature and limited institutional building. The four case studies result from violent conflict terminating for some by a ceasefire agreement (See for example, the Agreement "on a Cease-Fire and Separation of Forces," signed by Georgia and Abkhazia on May 14, 1994, in Moscow) and have evolved, including a shift in the terminology that delimits their boundary from ceasefire lines to contested borders (Prelz Oltramonti and Le Pavic 2025).

Over the past three decades, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria have established state-like institutions - parliaments, governments, and administrative systems at various levels (Ó Beacháin et al. 2016). Their trajectories, however,

have been shaped by differing geopolitical and geographical contexts. Of the four, only Abkhazia has maritime access; the others are landlocked (see maps below). Patronage also differs: Armenia supported Nagorno-Karabakh until its military reintegration into Azerbaijan in January 2024, while Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria have been backed—albeit to varying degrees—by Russia. Broers (2019, 213) argues that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict deviates from the typical Western narrative of Eurasian geopolitics, where Russia backs secessionist 'frozen conflicts' to hinder pro-Western regimes. In this dominant framing, Western support aligns with democratising states defending territorial integrity. In contrast, in the Nagorno-Karabakh case, it is Armenia, the party challenging territorial integrity, that seeks closer ties with Europe, while Azerbaijan, framed as "the parent state", remains distant from Euro-Atlantic institutions[2] .

In Abkhazia, Russia's support is contested by segments of the local elite and population (Gezerdava 2010; Kolstø 2020). On the contrary, Transnistria and South Ossetia have sought integration with the Russian Federation, formalised via an unrecognised referendum in 2006 in Transnistria. Based on recent field research (see Le Pavic et al. 2024) I argue that the will to 'join' the Russian Federation has since decreased in Transnistria, while contacts with the EU have gained prominence, including through a rapprochement between Moldova and the EU over the last decade. As a matter of fact, during the referendum held in October 2024 in Moldova on constitutionalising a pro-European trajectory, 30 polling stations were opened in Transnistria. Of those voting in Transnistria, 37.44% favoured the pro-European stance, while 62.56% opposed it[3] (Tv8.md 2024). Additionally, Transnistrian inhabitants could vote for the Moldovan president, with the pro-European candidate, Maia Sandu, coming second with 25,21% of the votes, 10 points behind the socialist candidate, Alexander Stoianoglo, with 35.41% of the votes (Ibid).



The map singles out the different territories whose status is contested. Following its annexation by Russia in 2014, Crimea became a de facto subject of the Russian Federation. As of January 1, 2024, Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh was forcefully reintegrated into Azerbaijan. The situation in Ukraine is not reflected on this map because, since February 24, 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion has resulted in a larger portion of the Ukrainian sovereign territory being under Russian control than in 2014, when it was Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR and LNR).

***Source**: Laris Karklis / The Washington Post*

2 I thank Dr. Laura Luciani for drawing my attention to this specific point.

3 Based on 15.526 voters, meaning that less than 10% of the Transnistrian population voted.

This collaboration between Transnistria and Moldova is unique among our four case studies. In the case of Abkhazia and Georgia, relations are increasingly securitised and polarised, with cross-boundary contacts steadily declining (Venhovens 2025). In English-language literature produced by both Western and Russian scholars, the states from which these four entities separated are often termed "parent" or "mother states" (see, for example, Vladimir Kolosov and Zotova 2021; Caspersen 2020) - Moldova for Transnistria, Georgia for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Azerbaijan for Nagorno-Karabakh. Likewise, "patron" or "sponsor" state labels are frequently applied to their external supporters, primarily Russia and Armenia, in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, until its military reintegration into Azerbaijan. Yet, I argue that such terminology is patronising and overlooks the agency of actors within these territories. In search of more suitable formulations, I use the periphrase: "the state from which X [e.g., Abkhazia] parted" and "the state supporting Y [e.g., South Ossetia].

Periodisation of the State of the Art

The first wave of research on Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria primarily focused on analysing border transformations following the dissolution of the USSR. Early studies centred on conflict dynamics and the causes of secession from Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova (King 2001; Lynch 2002). Laurence Broers (2013) provided a comprehensive overview of this literature in the Caucasus cases, identifying three distinct phases of academic research. The first phase sought to explain violent ethnic secessionism. During this period, key actors from the regions themselves, such as Abkhaz scholars Stanislav Lakoba (1995) and Liana Kvarchelia (1998), advanced narratives asserting the right of Abkhazia to establish a state distinct from Georgia. Conversely, Georgian scholars emphasised the role of Russian interference and defended the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity (Nodia 1997; Kukhianidze et al. 2004; Kemoklidze 2015). Western scholars largely concentrated on conflict resolution frameworks, proposing solutions such as federalism and, more recently, engagement without recognition (Coppieters 2001, 2019). The latter has become a recurring theme among international organisations and donors, often promoted alongside confidence-building measures and engagement without recognition (Le Pavic et al. 2024; Berg and Ker-Lindsay 2019). However, it has so far not reached its desired objective: the peaceful reintegration of Abkhazia into Georgia (Fischer 2010).

The second phase identified by Broers revolves around the perennialization of these contested regions, exploring how both internal governance and external influences contributed to the entrenchment of their de facto status. In the case of Transnistria, Roper (2001) offered a comparative analysis of the Gagauz and Transnistrian conflicts with Moldova, concluding that the latter remained unresolved due to the instrumentalisation of ethnicity by both the Moldovan and Transnistrian elites, to the extent that it sustains separation. Gagauzia, on the contrary, was reintegrated into Moldova after a 5-year existence (1990-1995) due to only partial success by the Gagauz leadership in consolidating Gagauzia's statehood through processes of state- and nation-building. In particular, the Gagauz Republic's authorities failed to subordinate law-enforcement agencies and local administrative institutions functioning in the Gagauz area, which remain loyal to the Moldovan central authorities, where Gagauz leaders were also involved (Kosienkowski 2017, 129). In addition to a lack of strong external support, the territory the Gagauzian authority controlled remained heterogeneous, with no clear unity between the elites and the population, and a dependence on Moldova for finance and services to such an extent that inhabitants did not perceive Gagauzia as distinct from Moldova (Ibid). Marcin Kosienkowski (2017) concludes that a deal between Moldova and the Gagauzian elite was facilitated as the latter wished autonomy within the Republic of Moldova, whose representatives were hopeful that it would set a good precedent to achieve a similar agreement with Transnistria. Russia's role in the perpetuation of these conflicts has been highlighted, although its influence is seen as less decisive in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. (Baev 1998; Alexander 2006; Amilakhvari and Baghaturia 2024).

The third phase, which Broers characterises as one of fragmentation, reflects a growing polarisation between geopolitical actors. Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states following the 2008 August War marked a turning point. This move directly challenged the consensus on the inviolability of Georgia's territorial integrity. Moscow has argued that the recognition of Kosovo set a precedent and has accused the West of applying a double-standard approach (Ó'Tuathail 2008), citing its continued support for Serbian claims over Kosovo as evidence of a more consistent approach. However, one can argue that Russians also apply a double-standard approach when supporting Serbia against Kosovo, thus intending to prevent separation, while backing Abkhazia and South Ossetia against Georgia, and hence sustaining the separation[4].

Two decades after introducing the concept of de facto state, though not in direct reference to Abkhazia, South Ossetia,

4 I thank prof Pål Kolstø for this valuable comment.

Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, Scott Pegg (1998; 2017) revisited the field with a review of the progress, challenges, and future directions in what he termed "de facto state studies". He identified several areas where significant research has been conducted, including nation- and state-building, quests for recognition, the potential strategic advantages of non-recognition, and democratisation processes in the absence of formal sovereignty, topics explored through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Our study builds on many of these themes in the findings section. Pegg also drew attention to several enduring problems in the field, many of which this paper engages with. The first issue is the ongoing challenge of defining what constitutes a de facto state and determining which entities should be included or excluded from this category. The politicisation of academic discourse has also been critiqued, notably by Yemelianova (2015, 234), who argued that Western scholarship often fails to transcend Cold War ideological paradigms—not only concerning Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, but also more broadly in its treatment of "post-Soviet states".

This working paper seeks to address such biases by incorporating diverse strands of scholarship in both Russian and English, including sources from Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. To my knowledge, no existing literature review has analysed the knowledge produced on our four case studies across linguistic and geopolitical divides in relation to knowledge produced from within. A recent publication on 'Western approaches to the Eurasian de facto states' (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2022, 58) noted a division of labour in academic knowledge production. They observed that "local researchers excel in in-depth knowledge of the history and culture of the region," while their Western counterparts contribute comparative and theoretical insights. This reflects a broader pattern across academia, where structural constraints often make it more difficult for non-Western scholars to publish their work independently (Kwiek 2020). Among these structural constraints, the lack of funding available locally is a major reason why researchers from the researched locations often depend on foreign (Western) grants to conduct their research and/or receive their salary. This shapes the research focus, methodology, and publications of the results (Trubina et al. 2020).

Trubina et al. (2020, 1) illustrated these dynamics by relying on two fictional scholars - Morris Zapp and Bogdan Voskreshchenskiy - to explore the political economy of knowledge production, resulting in structural academic inequalities. Analysing 22 leading English-language geography journals since the end of the Soviet Union, they found that while the number of publications from scholars based in countries that used to be included in the USSR has increased nearly sevenfold, these scholars remain underrepresented in editorial roles and other gatekeeping positions. Similarly, Jumayeva et al. (2023 1), in mapping knowledge production in the Caucasus, emphasised the marginal position of the region within international relations (IR) scholarship, with "local voices" largely confined to area studies. Thus, this study is rooted in and contributes to this body of literature, aiming to critically examine the dynamics of knowledge production by differently situated scholars. The paper seeks to identify commonalities and divergences in scholarly work and analyse them, considering the conflicting regional geopolitics that influence local, national, and international arenas.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws on Michel Foucault's concept of episteme, understood as "the strategic apparatus which permits separating out from among all the statements which are possible, those that will be acceptable within (...) a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false" (Foucault 1980, 197). In Foucault's work, the episteme operates as an "apparatus" (dispositif) that determines what may be characterised as scientific knowledge and what may not. The concept of apparatus is of interest to our analysis as it emphasises the entanglement of knowledge and power, shaping what can be said, by whom, and with what authority, as emphasised in the quote below:

'The apparatus is of strategic nature (... and) thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it. This is what the apparatus consists of: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge" (Foucault 1980, 196).

The apparatus, in this sense, captures how knowledge and power are co-constitutive: certain truths are enabled by existing power relations because they serve to reinforce and legitimise particular forms of authority.

Building on this, epistemes function as historically situated discursive apparatuses that define the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. They give rise to regimes of truth—specific configurations through which particular statements are accepted as true within a given context. These regimes encompass not only the content of knowledge but also the mechanisms that determine its

validation: the discourses that are made to function as truths; the institutional and procedural means by which true and false are distinguished; the techniques used to produce truth; and the social status of those entitled to speak the truth (Foucault 1980, 131).

This framework foregrounds the political nature of knowledge production. Of particular relevance to this analysis is the nexus between epistemes, regimes of truth, and the power relations that they sustain. Foucault's notion of speech-acts (énoncés) further highlights how power is exercised through the performativity of language, doing things with words (Austin 1975), not merely as a tool of communication but as a medium through which law, discourse, and prohibition are enacted (Foucault 1980, 139–140). Speech-acts, in this context, produce and delimit what is thinkable and sayable, rendering certain knowledge claims visible and legitimate, while others are marginalised or silenced.

Rather than viewing power as a static or hierarchical force, Foucault emphasises its relational and diffuse nature. Power operates through knowledge and discourse by positioning particular statements as 'truth' in specific historical and social contexts. This performativity of knowledge frames the analytical approach: I examine how discursive formations about Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria reflect and reproduce broader epistemic regimes.

Of particular interest is how divergent regimes of truth, grounded in distinct epistemes, structure what can be said, known, and contested in academic spheres. In the concluding discussion, the paper revisits these epistemic divergences, considering broader geopolitical antagonisms that shape knowledge production on the four case studies.

To this end, the paper first engages with terminology debates across languages, which reflect diverging political stances, yet show some divergence in the case of Russian scholars. I then trace the evolution of academic research over the past thirty years, structured along two axes: internal and external factors. Finally, I explore how geopolitical competition materialising into competing regional integration projects - namely the EU's Eastern Partnership and, since 2022, the Enlargement Policy, on the one hand, and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, on the other - shapes these scholarly debates. Methodologically, this study is based on a comprehensive literature review, as detailed in the following section.

Methodology

I searched academic publications systematically using search engines such as Google Scholar to access both Western and Russian sources, using English-language keywords combining the names of the four entities: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria - with the terms: statehood, de facto states, unrecognised states, quasi-states, state-within-states, informal states, and pseudo-states. These terms were selected based on Pegg's (2017) terminology review, which catalogues English-language designations used since 1999. Terms such as non-state states, contested states, puppet states, and the derivatives secessionist and separatist states, as identified by Kolstø (2022) were also included. This approach allows for compiling a substantial overview of academic literature produced in English, the dominant language of Western academic publishing.

To identify Russian-language literature, a search was conducted on the two main electronic academic libraries in Russia—eLibrary and CyberLeninka. Leading journals publishing on what is often framed as "post-Soviet de facto states" (Stepanova and Golunov 2022) were also consulted, namely, periodicals published by the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the MGIMO University's Journal of International Analytics. To a lesser extent, publications by think tanks, including the Russian International Affairs Council and Russia in Global Affairs, which publish in both English and Russian, were reviewed. In this way, it can be assessed whether these entities were a specific focus of regional academic inquiry and, if so, which topics dominated. Following the logic of the English-language keyword search, the names of the four entities in Russian: Абхазия, Нагорный Карабах, Южная Осетия, and Приднестровье were used. These Russian-language denominations, in combination with the terms: непризнанный (non-recognised), сепаратистский (separatist), частично суверенный (partially sovereign), частично признанный (partially recognised), in association with the denomination постсоветское пространство (post-Soviet space) were searched.

Searching for publications from scholars living in one of our four case studies proved to be challenging. In the case of Abkhazia, we searched for academic publications via the Abkhaz online library "Аҧсуа/Абхазская интернет-библиотека[5]" using the above

5 http://apsnyteka.org/ - last accessed July 24, 2025.

Russian-language terms, acknowledging that many Abkhaz publications are in Russian. This was complemented by browsing Academia.edu profiles of researchers based in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. To increase our engagement with knowledge produced from within these places, we reviewed publications from Abkhaz State University (ASU) and Shevchenko Transnistria State University. We recognise that we may not have been able to fully grasp this strand of knowledge production and see this working paper as an attempt to uncover literature, including that published outside the mainstream academic channels and/or by scholars for whom these entities are not abstract case studies but part of their lived- and in some cases, tragic – realities. Going beyond academic sources could also be an avenue to engage more with knowledge produced in the four places at stake, yet this paper is limited to academic knowledge due to the specific forms of epistemic authority attached to it.

I conducted a thematic analysis of the collected publications to identify the main terminology used and the central topics addressed. The following section presents the findings in three parts. First, it examines the debates around terminology and definitions in both academic spheres. It then analyses two major thematic lines across the literature: (1) the external dimensions of the entities and (2) the internal dynamics. Internal aspects refer to the dynamics from within, such as political regimes, economic dynamics, and social preferences. I acknowledge the recursive relation with external dynamics in which factors or forces situated outside the four case studies are encompassed, such as international organisations and third countries, regional integration frameworks, and broader (geo)political contexts.

Some publications engage with both aspects; in such cases, they are referred in both sections. Although internal and external dimensions are deeply interconnected, this analytical division allows for more clearly structure our comparative review of Russian and Western literature.

Classifying scholars by geography or affiliation is necessarily reductive, and I acknowledge that the division between positionalities within Western and Russian academic spheres erases complexities. Notably, publications from Armenian, Georgian, and Moldovan researchers are classified based on their language of publication, Russian or English. A more comprehensive review of the literature would ideally include publications in Armenian, Georgian, and Romanian languages. Additionally, multipositionality, overlapping, and shifting positions characterise the academic field. In this paper, the term Russian scholars refers to individuals affiliated with academic institutions located in Russia (e.g., Russian universities or the Russian Academy of Sciences). Western scholars encompass those affiliated with institutions in Western countries (e.g., the European Economic Area, North America). By “local scholars” I mean individuals based primarily in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, typically working in local universities, research institutions, and/or Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

Additionally, I acknowledge that the boundaries between these categories are porous. Numerous joint research projects have produced in-depth studies involving scholars across these regions (O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2020; Kolstø 2022). Furthermore, some Russian scholars work in Western institutions, and—less commonly—some Western scholars have worked in Russian institutions (mostly holding punctual fellowships) before February 24, 2022. Likewise, some scholars from the four entities are affiliated with institutions in Russia, Western countries, or third countries (e.g., Armenia in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh scholars). Highlighting these nuances and complexities, I argue that it remains analytically useful to distinguish between Russian and Western academic literatures to identify their respective patterns, priorities, and conceptual approaches in relation to the four case studies.

In this analysis, my positionality shapes both the perspective and scope of the research. As an early-career scholar with knowledge of and experience primarily in Western academic institutions, yet with lived experiences in Russian-speaking environments, I am able to engage with scholarship published in both English and Russian. While I am currently based at a Western academic institution, my previous research experience and engagement with academics in non-Western contexts have informed this exploratory analysis and my attempt to contribute to the decentring of knowledge production. At the same time, I acknowledge that this review of scholarship produced within the four case studies remains exploratory and could be further developed. This working paper builds on my doctoral research on social service provision in Transnistria and Abkhazia, which demonstrated that knowledge production and terminology are not only contested within academia but are also actively negotiated among local authorities, donors, international organisations, and residents in different contexts (Le Pavic Forthcoming).

Limitations

This working paper is an exploratory effort to map and compare Western and Russian academic knowledge production on four specific case studies, often analysed through the prism of contested statehood. Thus, it does not claim to offer an exhaustive literature review; as such, certain contributions may have been overlooked. Instead, the papers highlight patterns in analysing internal and external dimensions of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. From a decentering perspective, it engages as fully as possible with locally produced knowledge and foregrounds the voices of scholars from Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. However, only a limited number of publications, and none at all for South Ossetia, were found. This does not imply the absence of local scholarly production but rather points to issues of accessibility, language, and visibility within dominant academic channels. Likewise, the number of sources available for our four case studies differs, with Abkhazia being the most documented case in both Russian and Western scholarship, while only a few studies focus on South Ossetia. Transnistria has been slightly more documented than Nagorno-Karabakh in both scholarship. Constraints of access to South Ossetia are certainly among the explanatory factors, which would nonetheless deserve a closer examination.

Findings: Comparing Terminologies and Conceptualisations of De Facto States in Western and Russian Academic Literature

Western Scholars' Approach to the Concept

Different speech acts have been used to describe and analyse the situations of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, revealing a lack of consensus in both Western and Russian academic literature. This reflects what Kolstø (2022, 30) terms "terminological anarchy", refers to an absence of accord over basic definitions that impedes the cumulative development of scholarship. Since Scott Pegg coined the term 'de facto state' in 1998, drawing on the 1933 Montevideo Convention, debates have multiplied over the criteria for inclusion in this category. Galina Yemelianova (2015) criticised the international theory of recognition in international law, arguing that lacking international recognition is not a sufficient criterion to classify these entities as de facto. However, this approach remains dominant in the Western academic literature (Toolma 2016, Pegg 2017).

In early works, Pegg (1998) did not include Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, or Transnistria among de facto states, taking examples such as Somaliland and Northern Cyprus. Yet by 2017, these entities, along with Donetsk and Luhansk, had entered the field of "de facto state studies" (Pegg 2017). However, this categorisation remains contested by many actors, including residents, authorities from all sides, and representatives of international organisations. In academic work, this lack of a consensual definition of the research object undermines the analytical coherence of the term. As Kosienkowski (2022, 3) argues, this "conceptual mess" hampers research development and contributes to editorial scepticism about the validity of studies whose subject remains ill-defined. Various scholars have proposed supplementary criteria for defining de facto states, such as durability, effective territorial control, and legitimacy. Kolstø (2006) suggests a minimum existence of two years, while Caspersen (2012, 11) emphasises that at least two-thirds of the territory claimed should be controlled, including the main city and key regions. However, the selection of territorial benchmarks remains debated (Kursani 2021), and the criterion of independence would exclude entities like Transnistria and South Ossetia, whose leaderships seek integration into the Russian Federation (Kosienkowski 2013; Hoch 2020).

Russian Scholars' Approach to the Concept

The concept of 'de facto state' appeared in Russian literature alongside the emerging territorial conflicts after the dissolution of the USSR (Kolosov 2003). Many borders did not have treaty-based confirmation according to international law norms, therefore, creating immediate ethnicised and territorialised disputes in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Vladimir Kolosov [also Kolossov] – a Russian geographer from the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Sciences - was at the outset of the border and subsequent 'de facto' state studies, emphasising that the content and the function of the Russian borders did not correspond to their formal status (Kolosov, 2003). The de facto states formed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union are a sub-discipline in Russian academia due to their plurality and the many aspects of their making and functioning.

Markedonov (2021) categorises these entities into 'first-generation' de facto states (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh) and 'second-generation' ones (LNR, DNR). He links their emergence to crises of legitimacy and prolonged political instability. Russian scholarship often portrays these conflicts as resulting from unresolved questions of sovereignty and

recognition. According to Kolosov (2022)the absence of full sovereignty encourages militarisation and justifies armed conflict as a mechanism to protect de facto borders from "parent states". Stepanova and Golunov (2022) similarly, articulate the conflict-prone nature of de facto states, emphasising the risks of relapsing into armed conflicts over "secessionist state" between "patron" and "parent state" or "parent" and "de facto authorities".

Russian scholars agree that the dissolution of the USSR unleashed the emergence of new state entities (Kolosov 2003; Belashchenko 2020). According to their analysis, de facto states laid the premise for the nascent statehood far before the conflict, resulting in their separation from the "parent state". This includes a different ethnicity, an autonomous status within the "parent state" (e.g., Abkhazia within Georgia), in addition to cultural and linguistic commonality and strong connections with the patron state (Kolosov 2003, Belashchenko 2020).

The Russian academic community, overall, widely uses the term 'de facto' (see, for example, Platonova 2012; Markedonov 2021; Stepanova and Golunov 2022), taking great stock of the work of the founding fathers of these concepts in Western Europe (Pegg 1998; O'loughlin et al. 2011; Bakke et al. 2018; Berg and Vits 2018). 'De facto' is often substituted by 'unrecognised' or 'partially recognised state' (Markedonov 2018; Iashenko 2020; Golunov 2021; Kolosov 2022), which highlights status contestation in the outside world. The other terms found in the scoping analysis of the Russian sources are: 'problematic', 'unrecognised', 'informal', 'emerging', and 'partially sovereign'.

Upon the empirical analysis of academic articles, it is inferred that the Russian scholarship distinguishes between the 'internal' and 'external' sovereignty of de facto states, which is consistent with the choice of terminology. The majority of scholars, when analysing the internal aspects of de facto states, refer to them by their self-proclaimed names (Markedonov 2018; Novikov 2018; Belashchenko 2020; Vladimir Kolosov 2022) – 'The Republic of Abkhazia' ('Абхазская республика'), 'The Republic of South Ossetia' ('Республика Южная Осетия'), 'Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic' ('Приднестровская Молдавская Республика' or 'Приднестровье'), 'Nagorny Karabakh' ('Нагорный Карабах')[6], 'Donetsk People's Republic' ('Донецкая народная республика' and 'Luhansk People's Republic' ('Луганская народная республика')[7].

Internal dimensions: A State-Centric Focus

Western Academic Literature

Pegg identifies two main research strands in Western academia: nation/state-building and democratisation without sovereignty. These lines of inquiry acknowledge that sovereignty does not follow the Westphalian model of exclusive and recognised territorial control, but also takes many forms, including de facto states, autonomous regions, and governments in exile (Berg and Kuusk 2010). For example, Blakkisrud and Kolstø (2012, 284) argue that the South Caucasian case studies have managed effective territorial control and institutional consolidation, at least until the partial loss of control over Nagorno-Karabakh after 2020 and its termination in 2023, while maintaining rhetorical commitments to democracy.

Abkhazia, in particular, illustrates a form of ethnic democracy, in line with Smooha's (2002) typology. The presidency is reserved for ethnic Abkhaz, and knowledge of the Abkhaz language is constitutionally required (Popescu 2010). Surveys conducted in the early 2010s emphasised the existence of pluralistic debate and electoral competition in Abkhazia (O'Loughlin et al. 2011), even as structural features like ethnocracy and wartime legitimacy impede democratic deepening (Kopeček et al. 2016). Research explained the electoral openness by the internal political debate leading to compromise among the divergent political actors, resulting in "a competitive political system" (O'Loughlin et al. 2011, 173). Yet, comparing Abkhazia and Transnistria's political systems, Popescu (2006) stated that neither of them manages a democratic system due to the development of a "siege syndrome", which also hampers conflict resolution. The latter is also incomplete because Georgians who had been expelled during the 1990s could not return in safe conditions (Toria et al. 2019).
In 2010-2011, researchers conducted comprehensive surveys across Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, focusing on internal political preferences and showing that nationality remains the strongest predictor of divergent political preferences (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2014). They emphasised diversity in terms of ethnic composition and (geo)

6 In the Azerbaijani language, the republic is considered a separatist one and called just 'Karabakh' or 'Dağlıq Qarabağ'.

7 In Ukraine, these entities are officially called by their administrative unit names: 'Donetsk oblast' and 'Luhansk oblast'.

political preferences, showing that nationality is the main predictor of divergent opinions. Studies comparing Abkhazia and Transnistria reveal important contrasts in citizenship policies. Abkhazia permits dual citizenship only with Russia, consistent with its ethnic conception of nationhood, while Transnistria applies a civic model, enabling possession of multiple citizenships (Ganohariti 2020). Following the so-called "partial mobilisation" in Russia on September 21, 2022, many Abkhaz feared being sent to Ukraine, as 80% carry a Russian foreign passport (Kashig 2022). As highlighted by the Abkhaz scholar Liana Kvarchelia (2008), the lack of recognition for the "passport" issued in Abkhazia prompted many residents to obtain a Russian passport, not as a sign of allegiance to Russia, but because there was no alternative to mobility, with the recognition of the Soviet passports coming to an end in the early 2000s.

The citizenship policy is closely linked to the conception of identity's foundation as ethnic or civic. Analysis drawing on ethnographic methods unpacked the ethnic and national identity building in Abkhazia, where half of the population is not ethnically Abkhaz, with 20% identifying as Georgian, 10% as Russian, and 10% as Armenian, resulting in complex socio-political arrangements (Clogg 2008). Facing this situation, Abkhazia established Abkhaz as the "titular nation", yet including Megrelian, a sub-Georgian ethnic category (Broers 2012). Analysing the building of a collective identity in Transnistria and Abkhazia, research shows that in the latter, both authorities capitalised on the "kin to the enemy" to support their claim for statehood. Transnistrian authorities distinguished between 'our' and 'Bessarabian Moldovan' to incorporate the former as part of Transnistria (Dembińska 2019). Ethnographic research has highlighted how the social antagonising processes that war triggers have torn apart an ethnically diverse, "inter-national" (in the sense of nationality) community that used to exist in Abkhazia (Peinhopf 2020).

Russian Academic Literature

Russian scholars, benefiting from direct access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh have no territorial connection with Russia, to facilitating their access to data to conduct detailed empirical analyses of internal governance. Surveys and focus groups are commonly employed (Kolosov 2022). Attention is paid to state-building trajectories and political regimes. Abkhazia receives particular interest due to its ambiguous alignment with Russia and internal debates over civic versus ethnic foundations of the state (Platonova 2012). Skakov and Mukhanov (2017) approach Abkhazia as being the prisoner of its 'limbo status' in pinning all financial and security responsibility on Russia. Any external crisis in this regard, such as COVID-19, exacerbates the dependence on the so-called "patron state". Due to the precarious system of healthcare and other social services, the limitation of mobility across the de facto borders has grave social consequences on the population, resulting in more illegalised border crossings (Turov and Zotova 2022; Golunov 2021).

The analysis of the domestic affairs of de facto states also extends to the critical assessment of the nature of the political regime and the form of government. Golunov and Stepanova (2022) highlight the non-democratic nature of the four case studies (including the Donbas republics, although it goes beyond the cases), influenced by tough authoritarianism. For example, South Ossetia is marked by administrative pressure during elections, Abkhazia is known for the prevailing ethnocracy, and Transnistria has powerful economic groups, Sheriff being the most prominent one. However, Markedonov (2018) contends that de facto states passed through a process of democratisation during their existence, which assures their political viability even without the support of a "parent state". He puts in contrast "parent states" such as Georgia, which has a backsliding democracy, unlike its separated territories (Abkhazia). One recent example includes the successful resistance of the Abkhazian CSO representatives against the foreign agent legislation, in contrast with its adoption in Georgia amid widespread popular protests in May 2024.

External Dimension: A Common Focus on (Geo)political Process - Recognition, Patronage, and Strategic Alignment – A Western Focus on "Post-Conflict Management"

Western Academic Literature

Western scholarship has primarily focused on the external dimensions of de facto states, particularly their relations with international actors and "parent/patron states". Pegg (2018) notes key themes such as the diplomatic quest for recognition, consequences of non-recognition, and the paradox of "engagement without recognition"—a practice especially relevant in EU approaches towards Abkhazia and Transnistria (Berg and Pegg 2018; Coppieters 2019; Berg and Ker-Lindsay 2019). These dynamics are shaped by adherence to the principle of uti possidetis juris, emphasising territorial integrity and discouraging secession (Grzybowski et al. 2025). However, it is striking to observe the willingness of the EU, among other Western actors, not

to leave "a free field" for Russia and to keep "winning the hearts," in particular for Abkhazia and Transnistria (Cooley and Mitchell 2010; Kosienkowski 2012). I elaborate below on this zero-sum game conception, where the case studies are entangled.

Research and recent development show that relations with Russia and regional blocs are more nuanced than the oft-cited "Russian world" framework implies (O'Loughlin et al. 2020). The four case studies have been impacted by EU regional integration initiatives such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP, 2004) and the Eastern Partnership (2009). Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine signed Association Agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) in 2014, rejecting Eurasian Economic Union membership, as both regional integration frameworks have been made mutually exclusive, given the common external tariff encompassed in the DCFTA that is incompatible with the customs union comprised in the Eurasian Economic Union. Overcoming this zero-sum game approach would have entailed having the same external tariff between the EU and Russia. Moldova's signing of the AA/DCFTA in 2014 influenced Transnistria, which struck ad hoc arrangements with Moldova to access EU markets for a limited range of products. For example, Transnistria exports honey under Moldovan customs stamps and thus follows EU sanitary protocols.

On the contrary, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, informal practices remain the norm, limiting the potential of trade as a confidence-building measure (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020). Previous research has shown that in the case of Georgia-Abkhazia trade, informality dominates, in some instances overlapping with illegality, with a major role played by local stakeholders (Prelz Oltramonti 2015, 2017). In the case of South Ossetia, research showed a space of neitherland largely resulting from the ending of the trade activity, with the closure of the Ergneti market in 2004 by the Georgian government being a tipping point (Otruba 2019). Using the concept of Neitherland, Ariel Otruba (2019) referred to a spatial and temporal condition situated between war and peace. The Georgian villages near the contested border with South Ossetia are not under Russian control, yet the state's presence is weak or absent. 'Neitherland' refers to this condition of abandonment and uncertainty (see also (Le Pavic and Merabishvili 2026). Meanwhile, the contested border with Georgia became a symbolic site used in the domestic political competition and turned into a theatre to displace Georgia's victimhood to the international audience (Toal and Merabishvili 2019).

Russian academic literature

Since the relations with the 'patron state' are most often linked to the de facto state's internal agenda and essential questions of economic and political viability, the 'Russian factor' is often internalised in scholarly assessments (Markedonov 2018, Kolossov 2022). Russia is framed as "the patron state", the main "purse", and a guarantee of preserving de facto borders at the moment of separation from the "parent state". "Patron states" ensure the political and military viability of de facto states, and the relations between them also define the political dynamics on the ground. Some scholars critically assess de facto states' efforts to embrace more responsibility for their statehood (Markedonov, 2018). The existing scholarly works discern de facto states' relations with the West, 'parent' state, and the 'patron' state. Regarding the 'parent' state, a few scholars delve into relations between de facto and 'parent state', mostly describing them as of a 'hostile nature' (Stepanova and Golunov, 2022) with a strong counter-recognition nature of the latter.

Golunov and Stepanova (2022) also explored de facto states' efforts to engage with the international community, namely, via the respect of fundamental human rights, referring to the nodal problem of Abkhazia – rights of minorities. However, due to a highly militarised agenda of de facto states utilised as a key factor in their nation-building, Golunov and Stepanova assume that international recognition may come at odds with the securitisation of popular support that has been built on the "external threat" narrative. At a broader level, Russian scholars believe that respect for international law is one of the boosters for the recognition of de facto states (Iashenko, 2020), which appears at odds with the principle of Uti possidetis.

Concluding Discussion: A Comparative Approach to Western and Russian Academic Literatures Against the Backdrop of Competitive Regional Integrations

While for some scholars, the "polemical and politicised discourse" constitutes a "problem in de facto states studies" (Pegg 2017, 23) this working paper regards it instead as generative, offering a critical entry point for analysing the production of knowledge in and on the four case studies: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria, whose very names are debated. The comparative analysis showed that academic speech acts partially aligned with the socio-political conditions under which they are produced, yet also diverged in notable ways. For example, Russian scholars continue to use the terminology 'de facto' when

referring to Abkhazia after 2008, even though Russia had officially recognised it as a sovereign state. The terminology employed by Russian scholars thus provides a more nuanced understanding of the gap between the Russian government's official stance and the position of academic actors.

It is important to stress that the logic underpinning Russian state policy should not be viewed as coherent or strategically unified. This incoherence became particularly apparent in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Just five days after recognising the 'DPR' and 'LPR' as independent states, Russia launched a war that effectively extinguished both entities, ending the hybrid stage of the conflict (Kormych et al. 2023), even while continuing to invoke their "protection." Importantly, Russian authors also examine how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shapes internal agendas and developments in these territories through a so-called "rally-around-the-flag" effect (Golunov and Stepanova 2022). This illustrates how perceived external military threats, coming from the 'parent state' or the West, reinforce domestic political unity, often under authoritarian or ethnocratic rule.

Since 2022, terminology in Russian publications has increasingly reflected domestic legal constraints with the growing recurrence of euphemisms and designations to depict Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a "special military operation" or "armed conflict" (Kolosov 2022; Stepanova and Golunov 2022). Thus, prominent Russian scholars publishing on Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and LNR and DNR align with the Russian authorities' legal constraints on speech acts when it comes to Russia's all-out war on Ukraine. On March 2, 2023, the Russian State Duma adopted Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code penalising the spread of "fake information and discreditation of the volunteers taking part in the special military operation[8]" (Russian State Duma 2023). In half a year, the number of criminal suits amounted to 5.000, and Russian academics faced accusations of treason, thus pushing them to conform with the official terminology (see, for example, Kolosov 2023).

Those who use other terms have emigrated (among the most famous examples are Ekaterina Shulman, Grigorii Yudin). In an open letter, published in the Russian mainstream newspaper RBK, researchers from the Russian Academy of Sciences lamented the arrest of a third scientist and emphasised their despair as "any article or report could lead to charges of treason", contributing to many leaving science or refusing to enter the field (RBK, RosBiznesKonsalting 2023). Thus, the alignment with the Russian official speech acts is now reinforced by a constraining legal environment, which can lead to either a decrease in Russian scholarship on 'politically sensitive' matters or the blunt following of the propaganda-produced narratives, including on the four case studies.

Russian academic literature on internal developments in these contested territories tends to reflect the paradoxes of the Kremlin's post-2008 engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although both entities were recognised as independent states following the August 2008 war with Georgia, Russia has since deepened its control, including through measures of internalisation such as the 2022 seizure of part of the Abkhaz Black Sea coast in Pitsunda. This move triggered widespread protest in Abkhazia, particularly among younger generations, who rallied around the movement Ҳараҳпицунда ("Our Pitsunda") (Le Pavic 2023). Some Abkhaz scholars have critically assessed this tightening integration, viewing it as an elite-led process tolerated only as the lesser of two evils in a context of international isolation (Kvarchelia 2008). Others have gone further, arguing that aspects of the Russian-Abkhaz agreements violate Abkhaz legal norms. Legal scholar Said Gezerdava (2019) emphasizes that the Abkhaz Constitution guarantees freedoms such as assembly, thereby facilitating the work of local civil society organisations (CSOs) and their ability to interact with domestic institutions.

Over the last two decades, a growing body of ethnographic research has documented and analysed valuable aspects of the everyday life of differently situated individuals. Some of this research is conducted by local academics and has unveiled peculiar social dynamics, examining local responses to gender-based violence, such as a hotline operated by a Transnistrian CSO (Alistratova 2017), or researching the intersection of ethnicity and gender in nationalist discourses surrounding the war in Nagorno-Karabakh (Shahnazarian 2010).

In both Western and Russian academic literatures, research on the external dimensions of these territories tends to focus on state-like processes: the quest for recognition, relationships with "patron" and "parent states", and the broader international

8 "Любое публичное распространение заведомо ложной информации, а также публичные действия, направленные на дискредитацию Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации, добровольческих формирований, организаций и лиц, которые содействуют в выполнении возложенных на ВС РФ задач, недопустимы" http://duma.gov.ru/news/56483/

environment, including the regional role of the European Union. Previous research shows that, despite their lack of formal recognition, the EU plays a significant role in Abkhazia and Transnistria, primarily through funding CSOs, while Russia supports de facto authorities through direct budgetary transfers, up to 50% in the case of Abkhazia's annual budget (Hoch et al. 2017; Berg and Ker-Lindsay 2019; Le Pavic et al. 2024). Except for Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia also serves as a major energy provider, exercising significant leverage and reinforcing the characterisation of these polities as "client states" (Kosienkowski 2019).

Russian scholarship frequently aligns with Russian foreign policy narratives and often criticises the normative biases of the Western approach to the recognition of contested entities. For example, Serguei Markedonov engaged international audiences by pointing to the double standards in recognising entities such as Kosovo while denying similar status to those within Russia's sphere of influence (Markedonov 2021). A legalist lens tends to prevail in Russian academia, particularly in relation to sovereignty and recognition debates surrounding our case studies.

Drawing on Foucault's conceptualisation of power as both repressive and productive, I argue that the categorisation of Abkhazia and Transnistria as "frozen conflicts," "breakaway regions," or "de facto states" is not merely descriptive—or, as Markedonov (2018) would argue, "the most neutral option"—but deeply performative. Such categories shape who is seen as a legitimate actor, what policy options are deemed viable, and how socio-economic developments are envisaged. My previous research shows that CSOs in Transnistria and Abkhazia actively challenge these labels - especially in the Abkhazian case - to renegotiate discursive framings (Le Pavic 2024b - see Chapter X).

Considering Foucault's notions of episteme, regimes of truth, and speech acts in the four case studies of knowledge production, regional integration projects emerge not just as rival geopolitical poles but as discursive formations with their own rationalities, exclusions, and (performative) truth effects. The so-called "contested neighbourhood" becomes more than a space of territorial or economic competition; it is a terrain of epistemic confrontation, where rival regimes of knowledge seek to govern from a distance. It is also a site of counter-conduct, where local actors develop situated strategies to contest, reinterpret, and reappropriate these knowledge regimes, for example by refusing to be framed as "de facto" but arguing that the place where they live exists as a state "de jure" (reference to an interview with an Abkhaz CSO representative in 2021).

Several (mostly Western) scholars have attempted to shift the research agenda, in relation to the evolving dynamics on the ground, where situations are shifting (e.g., the violent termination of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2024). Comai (2018), for instance, argues that these entities are not "transient anomalies" but enduring political forms that should be studied as such. He calls for comparative frameworks that move beyond conflict and recognition paradigms and apply the same methodological tools to these entities as would be used in the study of internationally recognised states. This contradicts Pål Kolstø's early work on quasi-states, which claimed that this transient phenomenon would inevitably end (Kolstø 2006). Dembinska and Campana (2017) highlight the need to explain variation in the endurance of de facto states by incorporating internal dynamics to complement existing knowledge of external factors.

On this latter point, the increasingly constrained access for Western researchers must also be acknowledged. Empirical data collection is often regarded as sensitive by local authorities, limiting possibilities for fieldwork. While remote methods have become more common since the COVID-19 pandemic, developing collaborative research with locally based scholars offers a promising way forward (Le Pavic 2025a). Such partnerships contribute to mitigating the extractivist tendencies - referring to practices in which researchers - often from powerful institutions or the Global North, extract knowledge, data, or insights from communities, regions, or individuals (in this case located in the global East) without meaningful engagement, benefit-sharing, or reciprocity (Trubina et al. 2020) - In addition, such collaborations may enable knowledge producers who have been marginalised in academic discourse to publish in arenas such as English-language academic journals, thus contributing to a fertile academic dialogue.

A more in-depth analysis could look at how research refers to each other, to unveil the extent to which differently situated researchers quote each other. It would also be interesting to delve more into the disciplinary aspects of the different research conducted to see if there is a shift over time and space. The table presented in this paper offered a first exploratory attempt. Lastly, further research could explore the terminology and knowledge produced over cases such as Northern Cyprus and Somaliland, for example. This would enable comparative analyses with the four cases analysed here.

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