

THE UNRECOGNIZED STATES OF EURASIA AS A PHENOMENON OF THE USSR'S DISSOLUTION

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Abstract: This article argues that scholars and policy analysts need to take unrecognized states more seriously since they are not a temporary phenomenon. These “statelets” are not all the same, but come in a variety of different types. Their importance derives, in part, from the remaining gaps in the post-WWII international system.

Twenty years ago the Soviet Union dissolved, leading to the formation of fifteen independent states. During the intervening period, each of these states was able to traverse the difficult path toward establishing statehood and international legitimacy. Some of the newly independent states have managed to transition from their start as former Soviet republics to becoming members of NATO and the European Union (i.e., the Baltic states), while some have faced considerable challenges and even become “failed states” (e.g., Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan).

But the new internationally recognized states are not the only product of the USSR—one of the major consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union was the appearance of new formations that have also declared their sovereignty: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, and the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. Though they were able to defend themselves through armed confrontation and bloody conflict, these

entities have not obtained universal international recognition even as a limited number of UN member states have recognized them. In addition to these new statelets of the 1990s, other entities have sought unsuccessfully to achieve independence through military force and internal institutionalization—the most prominent example being the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in Russia’s North Caucasus.

The Emergence of Unrecognized States

The emergence of unrecognized entities resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union paralleled ethno-political confrontations. In 1992, a cease-fire was enforced in the Georgian-Ossetian and Moldovan-Transnistrian regions. In 1994, cease-fires were also successfully enforced in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and in Chechnya (with a second deal coming in 1996). The cease-fire agreements established a new status quo and the termination of large-scale military confrontation; although violations of ceasefires and continued individual actions took place, they were not the result of overt political decisions. Conflicts, as well as the status of unrecognized entities, became “frozen.” In some cases, the military-political balance of forces determined these conditions (e.g., Nagorno-Karabakh), in other situations socio-psychological and legal reasoning complemented the political-military factors (e.g., Chechnya, with its “delayed status” for five years until 2001).

However, the “freeze” could not last, since the “losers” in these situations were interested in changing the existing balance of forces. They sought to accumulate enough resources to change the status quo, with varying degrees of success (Georgia is in the worst situation in this context while Azerbaijan is in a better position). Periodically, Russia attempted to change the situation on the ground, particularly in Chechnya from 1999 to 2000. Georgia did similar things in Abkhazia from 1998 to 2001, and in South Ossetia from 2004 to 2008. Azerbaijan’s leaders, in contrast, focused on changing the format for achieving a diplomatic resolution, making good progress by excluding Stepanakert from negotiations between Yerevan and Baku. Meanwhile, over the last two decades, according to Russian political analyst Dmitri Trenin, “unrecognized republics actually received all the trappings of statehood—constitutions and governments as well as police and military forces.”¹ Now any fruitful expert discussion about secession and territorial integrity is impossible without referring to the issue of unrecognized states.

By recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in

¹ Dmitri Trenin. 2002. “Predisloviye k Russkomu izdaniyu” [The Foreword to the Russian edition] in Bruno Coppieters, *Federalizm i conflict na Kavkaze* [Federalism and conflict in the Caucasus]. Moscow: Moscow Carnegie Endowment: 4.

August 2008, Russia created a precedent for redefining Soviet-era inter-republic borders and establishing new interstate boundaries. Thus, the process of ethnic self-determination accompanying the Soviet collapse is not finished. This stage in history will not be complete until there is successful conflict resolution and all new entities are recognized as legitimate. Meanwhile, without the completion of this process, it is impossible to speak about the sustainability of post-Soviet countries, their real independence, and the transition to democracy.

The Importance of Understanding the Nature of the New Entities

In this regard, an adequate understanding of the nature and characteristics of the unrecognized republics of the former Soviet Union is an urgent academic and policy task for several reasons. Problems with unrecognized states are the subject of many books and articles. However, almost all studies on the subject are characterized by “geopolitical determinism.” The socio-political situations in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh have been analyzed primarily in the context of the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West (e.g., the United States, European Union, and NATO). The internal dynamics of non-recognized entities, their state-building and identity formation, is beyond the purview of most experts. According to the British political analyst Laurence Broers, the West for many years viewed the situations in these formations as a function of the ethno-political conflicts of the early 1990s. As a result, the “unrecognized republics” are rarely seen through the prism of Western concepts of transition and democratization, which, in fact, do apply to these states. Instead of seeing these formations in an independent political environment, the *de facto* states usually are considered only in the context of their interactions with external actors and the peace process.²

Therefore, European and American political science literature defined the post-Soviet unrecognized entities as breakaway republics, separatist states, or quasi-states. This approach inherently assumes that breakaway entities in the future could go back and be converted from quasi-states into actual parts of their “maternal” state. At the same time, the returning process itself is identified with ethno-political conflict resolution. In essence, the restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, necessarily means the rejection of the quasi-statehood of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. The consequence of this approach has been that Western observers consider all

² Laurence Broers. 2005. “The politics of non-recognition and democratization,” in Laurence Broers eds. *The limits of leadership: Elites and societies in the Nagorny Karabakh peace process*. London: Conciliation Resources: 70.

the internal processes in the unrecognized republics to be “temporary” or “unreal” and assert that they will disappear at the very moment when the current status quo is overturned, and the status of the “disputed territories,” in contrast, is defined. Ironically, according to Kimitaka Matsuzato, a prominent researcher of the phenomenon of de facto statehood, “the fundamental basis of political science lies, as far as it is a science, in addressing what the state is.”³

In this article we will, first, define the phenomenon of “unrecognized states,” second, classify certain characteristics of the different formations (regardless of their socio-political and ethno-cultural contexts), and third, analyze the dynamic approaches of the major global players and international actors toward unrecognized states. Unfortunately, this issue has been politicized too much over the last two decades. Many have seen an open or latent preference for the “separatists” and “extremists” in the attempt to start studying the domestic dynamics in these entities.

Nevertheless, unrecognized states, despite all of the above-described risks, are an unavoidable phenomenon in contemporary politics. Even the biggest states of the world (by population and territory) have held such a status. The People’s Republic of China (PRC), for example, was not represented in the UN from October 1949 to October 1971. The interests of China were represented by the Republic of China (Taiwan). Only when the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 2758 of October 25, 1971, did the order of things change.⁴

Today it is impossible to find Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Somaliland, Taiwan, the Sahrawi (Sahara) Arab Democratic Republic, the Shan state, or Free Kashmir on many world maps. However, their very existence reflects the de facto nature of sovereignty among contemporary states.

Defining Unrecognized States

Let us look at the definition of the term “unrecognized state.” If it implies non-recognition by the international community, we must remember that today the international community itself, as an institution, is suffering a deep political, juridical and axiological crisis. Thus, both recognized and unrecognized states appeal to the international community, but they can hardly expect an intelligible answer. After the end of the Cold War, the contours of the new world order are not clear yet; this hinders the development of criteria for the recognition of geopolitical entities as independent states.

³ Kimitaka Matsuzato. 2010. Interviewed by Sergey Markedonov, Washington, DC, October, 4.

⁴ See the full text of the resolution: [http://www.un.org/russian/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=A/RES/2758\(XXVI\)](http://www.un.org/russian/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=A/RES/2758(XXVI)) (accessed March 8, 2012).

The biggest problem for the international community is that unrecognized states have been recognized by their residents. One may accuse (and with good reason) the politicians of Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia, or South Ossetia of extremism, but their extremism rests on the mass support of their citizens. Any peace-making initiative aimed at settling disputes between recognized and unrecognized states must take this extremism into account, otherwise the consequences may be grave. Also, using such a criterion as *democracy* to determine the legitimacy of a regime does not always work against unrecognized entities. Not all unrecognized entities are authoritarian. Many of them have held electoral campaigns and peaceful transfers of power to a member of the opposition (e.g., Abkhazia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus). One problem when talking about democracy in the context of unrecognized states is that, in most cases, members of rival ethnic groups were often expelled, thus depriving them of their right to participate.

Russian political scientist Arthur Tsutsiyev argues that “the family of the unrecognized [states] has a complex composition.”⁵ We can therefore identify several types of unrecognized states.

First: **self-proclaimed republics**, which exist for as little as a few days to several years, but fail to create effective governing institutions and military structures. For example, the Gagauz Republic was proclaimed on the territory of Moldova in August 1990, even before the establishment of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. This territory—with a population of nearly 150,000, 80% of whom were Gagauzians, a Christian Turkic people—pioneered the movement of self-proclaimed republics in the Soviet space. However, ultimately Gagauzia did not secede from the Republic of Moldova. In 1994, the Moldovan Parliament adopted the “Law on the special legal status of Gagauzia (Gagauz-Yeri),” granting the region considerable autonomy. Today most of the political forces of Gagauz-Yeri do not demand full independence (with the exception of the People’s Front for the Salvation of Gagauzia). At the same time, there is a consensus among Gagauzian politicians and public figures that the Gagauz-Yeri autonomy should be enlarged.

Probably the record holder for the number of self-proclaimed entities is the Russian Northern Caucasus. Five entities proclaimed themselves on the territory of the Karachai-Cherkessia Republic alone! In 1993, besides Armenian separatism, Azerbaijan encountered Talysh separatism from the Persian-speaking people living in the South of Azerbaijan. The Talysh-Mughan Republic, headed by Azerbaijan Army Colonel Alikram Gumbatov, was proclaimed in June 1993 in Lenkoran. However, this

⁵ Arthur Tsutsiyev. 2006. “Territorii problemnogo suvereniteta.” *Nauchnye tetradi Instituta Vostochnoi Evropy* 31:1 (January).

experiment failed; in August 1993 Gumbatov was arrested, after which the Talysh political movement was marginalized. The self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria existed for a longer time. During 1991-1994 and 1996-1999, there were attempts to build a de facto Chechen state. However, in both cases, the state-building experiments failed.

Second: **de-facto states**. These entities possess *suspended* sovereignty and managed to implement their projects of state-building (i.e., consolidating power and establishing control over a certain territory) within two to three decades. In addition, as a rule, such de facto state entities have their own foreign policies. The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic has several representations abroad (in Armenia, Russia, France, the United States, Australia, Lebanon, and Central Europe). Their leaders, although not recognized as full-fledged presidents or heads of government, take part in the negotiating processes for determining their statuses. In some negotiations, they are considered as independent parties to the conflicts (as in the case of Transnistria). This allows them to take part in authoritative international forums.

Third: **partially recognized states** (entities with limited recognition). These entities are not UN members and they are not recognized by the majority of UN member states. But they have made serious claims for international legitimacy and have attained many attributes of sovereignty. The entities of this third type are recognized by a varying number of UN member states, ranging from dozens (e.g., the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic, Kosovo, Taiwan) to several (e.g., Abkhazia, South Ossetia) to one (e.g., the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is recognized only by Turkey, and Free Kashmir, which is recognized only by Pakistan).

Purely quantitative indicators are not fundamental to assessing progress in the process of international legitimization. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are recognized by fewer countries than the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic (which is also a member of the African Union). But the independence of the two former Georgian autonomies is recognized by the Russian Federation, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the “nuclear club.” Unlike de facto states, these partially recognized entities signed bilateral treaties with states that have recognized them (thus they are considered legitimate beyond the immediate country of their dispute). In some cases, diplomatic relations are established between partially recognized entities and UN member states.

At the same time, a partially recognized status does not allow access to the UN at all. Despite the support for Kosovo’s independence by seven members of the “Great Eight,” two of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, Russia and China, called the full-fledged inclusion of the former Serbian land into the international community impossible (partly due to it joining international security mechanisms). Members of

the EU that have refused to recognize Kosovo's independence (Romania, Spain, Slovakia, Greece, and Cyprus) hamper Kosovo's ability to join the European Union and other European structures.

In conclusion, it is necessary to note that unrecognized states are an important element of contemporary geopolitical transformations. Their prominent role in current international politics is explained by the incomplete formation of the new global world-order, which emerged at the end of World War II. The current system of international relations is characterized by vagueness, legal and political ambiguity, substantial gaps between de-facto and de-jure entities, and ample room for interpretation on fundamental issues. But what is most important is that the protracted transition from one system of international relations to another strongly impedes the elaboration of common approaches and criteria for recognizing new states, secessionist movements, and territorial integrity. All this allows unrecognized republics to maintain their existence and find allies among influential international actors.

