

### The External Relations of De Facto States in the South Caucasus

Comai, Giorgio

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Comai, G. (2017). The External Relations of De Facto States in the South Caucasus. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 94, 8-14. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-88095-8>

**Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

**Terms of use:**

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

## The External Relations of De Facto States in the South Caucasus

By Giorgio Comai (Dublin City University)

### Abstract

Post-Soviet de facto states are small-sized jurisdictions with limited domestic resources. They need credible military support from a patron to ensure their continued existence, and substantial financial support to provide public goods, services, and a degree of welfare to their resident population. Their unrecognised status limits their access to international trade and prevents them from joining international organisations; however, both local residents and de facto authorities find ways to interact with the outside world.

### The Key Role of the Patron

Since Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, its role as the main partner and sponsor of these territories has increased substantially. Indeed, Russia serves not only as a guarantor of their security but also as the main sponsor of their state budget and pension system. More than 50 per cent Abkhazia's budget, and approximately 90 per cent of South Ossetia's budget, officially comes from Russia's aid, with a significant part of other incomes dependent on either aid flows or trade with Russia [see Figure 1 on p. 11].

Having a Russian passport, as most residents of these two territories do, allows freedom of movement, even if travel to Western Europe might otherwise be effectively limited by the reluctance of some embassies to grant them a visa due to their place of residence. Perhaps more importantly, at least for the elderly and their families, is the fact that residents who are Russian citizens are entitled to receive a Russian pension. As of 2016, the average pension for Abkhazian residents who are Russian pension-holders was approximately 120 USD and—according to the local statistical office—is on par with the average salaries (the average pension in South Ossetia is approximately 100 USD). Financial support from Russia is all the more important in a context where a large share of residents with registered monetary incomes (more than 80 per cent) receive that income from either the local budget or the Russian pension fund [see Figures 2 and 3 on p. 12].

In Nagorno-Karabakh, its patron (Armenia) provides finances for more than 50 per cent of its budget. However, Armenian diaspora also plays a key role in sponsoring infrastructure development. For example, the yearly telethon hosted by the "Armenia Fund" received 15 million USD in donations in 2016; a review of their records shows that these resources finance activities that would otherwise have to be financed by the budget (or remain unfunded), such as building roads and social housing, as well as the construction and renovation of education and health facilities.<sup>1</sup>

1 "Armenia Fund's Completed Projects", *Armenia Fund Official website*, retrieved on 28 February 2017, <<https://www.armeniafund.org/projects/completed/>>

In all of these territories, the patron also provides technical support and sponsors capacity-building initiatives aimed at local institutions. However, no matter how strong the support from the patron, the external relations of de facto states in the South Caucasus include interactions beyond the patron at multiple levels, from conflict negotiations and diplomatic missions, to trade, migration and cross-border activities.

### MFAs, Beyond International Recognition

Achieving international recognition remains, at least formally, a key foreign policy goal of the MFAs of post-Soviet de facto states. Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia both understand that their chances of achieving widespread international recognition are limited; however, they strive to widen and strengthen their network of support around the world through their limited means. Even in the case of South Ossetia, where this goal may exist only on paper because a large share of the resident population and the ruling elite strive towards joining the Russian Federation, there are observable efforts aimed at reaching out to the outside world.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia have dispatched an ambassador to Venezuela, which offers occasions for emissaries of these governments to be treated on a par with those of internationally recognised countries in one of the few places where this is possible.<sup>2</sup> Representatives of Abkhazia's MFA have established formal ties with several Italian municipalities, and its representatives have taken part in tourism fairs in different European locations. South Ossetia has opened its own representation office in Rome.<sup>3</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh has secured formal

2 Beyond Russia, only Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. No UN member states recognise the independence of Nagorno Karabakh.  
3 The Italian MFA immediately declared that it did not recognise its legitimacy, see Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release regarding the opening of the self-proclaimed representative office of the so-called 'Republic of South Ossetia' in Rome", 1 April 2016, <<http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2016/04/comunicato-della-farnesina-sull.html>>

support for its right of self-determination from multiple US states, the Basque Parliament, and a number of municipalities elsewhere.

Such activities do not bring immediate tangible results. However, authorities in de facto states seem to believe that establishing a network of international support at this level may help provide contrast to the narrative promoted by their parent state and possibly help them obtain support in time of crisis.

While Nagorno-Karabakh is officially excluded from conflict negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, representatives of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's MFA take part in the "Geneva international discussions." However, the 38 rounds of negotiations that occurred between 2008 and December 2016 have achieved few results, their main function being that of keeping a line of communication open between the de facto authorities, Tbilisi and the co-chairs (OSCE, EU and UN) as well as preventing further tensions. Officials from Abkhazia also interact with the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), which despite a yearly budget of approximately 18 million EUR and more than 200 officers on the field has only modest achievements to show and remains in place largely as a symbol of EU's political commitment to remain engaged in conflict resolution initiatives in Georgia.

Beyond official activities, one of the key roles of authorities of de facto states is to enhance their international standing in the online world. This includes, for example, highlighting their point of view and perspectives through a variety of tools. These tools range from bureaucratic communications on official websites, to less formal messages on social media, including English language posts on Twitter and videos published on Facebook.

The official communication outputs of the MFAs of de facto states in the South Caucasus differ substantially from that of MFAs of recognised states in the region. For example, they talk less about economy and trade than their recognised peers and frequently reference their independence [see Figure 4 on p. 13]. The limited number of countries that are mentioned with any regularity in their press releases reflects their limited capacity to effectively conduct formal interactions at the international level. Their small size as well as the modest resources they can dedicate to such activities, however, impacts their outreach capacity equally as much as their non-recognition [see Figure 5 on p. 14].

### International Organisations and Civil Society

In the case of Abkhazia, where various international organisations sponsor or implement projects, the MFA is

also in charge of serving as a point of reference and contact person between donors and local authorities. UN agencies (UNICEF, UNHCR, UNDP, UNFPA), the European Union, the International Red Cross, the Danish Refugee Council, World Vision, and Action Against Hunger are among those who still sponsor or directly implement projects in Abkhazia, accounting for more than 10 million USD per year, and thus interact with de facto authorities. International projects supported by these organisations provide key inputs to the local health and education sectors, support economic development (especially in the Gali district), and provide opportunities for local civil society organisations to increase their network of contacts at the international level.

The situation is quite different in South Ossetia, where such interactions have diminished substantially after 2008. Due to strong opposition from Azerbaijan, the funding of projects in Nagorno Karabakh are also severely limited, as few governments or organisations unaffiliated with the Armenian diaspora finance activities in Nagorno-Karabakh. USAID has traditionally been willing to sponsor projects in Nagorno-Karabakh, but the projects must occur within the boundaries of Soviet-time NKAO;<sup>4</sup> this condition makes USAID funding unavailable for a substantial part of the remaining landmine clearance work that UK-based Halo Trust has been implementing in Nagorno-Karabakh since 2000.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2010, the European Union has been sponsoring the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), a multi-million peace-building programme aimed at promoting dialogue across the conflict line and at enhancing the capacities of civil society organisations and media that are willing to join such initiatives. While activities sponsored by the diaspora obtain high visibility in the local and Armenian media, peace-building initiatives such as EPNK receive much less attention on both sides of the de facto border, partly because they challenge the dominating nationalist rhetoric. Scant visibility of international projects is however not peculiar to Nagorno-Karabakh. In Abkhazia, projects supported by international governmental and non-governmental organisations struggle to enter the domestic mainstream media space even when they focus on issues that are not necessarily related to peace building initiatives.

4 NKAO, or 'Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast', is the administrative unit that delimited Nagorno Karabakh in Soviet times. Since the conflict in the early 1990s, Armenian forces control a substantially larger territory.

5 "Our role in Nagorno Karabakh", *The Halo Trust*, retrieved on 28 February 2017. <<https://www.halotrust.org/minefreenk/our-role-in-nagorno-karabakh/>>

Concerned that increased visibility may politicise their presence and thus threaten the viability of their activities, international donors are generally content to keep a low profile, not engaging, for example, in high visibility advocacy campaigns that may characterise their presence elsewhere.

### Life Across the De Facto Borders

The de facto border between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan is highly militarised: clashes and sniper fire resulting in casualties are not rare, even after phases of recrudescence of conflict, such as the one that occurred in April 2016. In contrast, the line separating Abkhazia and South Ossetia from mainland Georgia used to be porous, but in recent years, border crossings have become more difficult even for local residents. Barbed wire now seals large segments of South Ossetia's southern border. The number of crossing points along the Inguri river have been significantly reduced, further complicating the life of the ethnic Georgian community that for personal, economic or health reasons needs to go back and forth between Abkhazia and neighbouring Samegrelo.<sup>6</sup>

It is mostly ethnic Georgians who are involved in the informal economy across the de facto borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, trading hazelnuts, fruit and vegetables. Because there is no customs office, trade through check points occurs either through people carrying individual luggage (up to 50 kg per person is allowed), or through other means likely to involve corruption. Authorities in South Ossetia estimate that up to 200 tonnes of vegetable and fruits from Georgia cross the de facto border to the mainly Georgian-inhabited Akhgori district and are then traded further to Tskhinvali and Russia.<sup>7</sup> The figure, which is difficult to verify, ignited a debate in early 2017 in South Ossetia on the possibility of formalising trade with Georgia by opening a customs office.

In recent years, the issue of receiving health services across the de facto border has also become a matter of debate, particularly in Abkhazia. Despite substantial Russian support, Abkhazia's health system is not able to offer satisfactory care for some chronic diseases or health issues that have become increasingly common in contemporary Abkhazia, such as car accidents and drug abuse. In 2012, the Georgian government started a programme that allowed Abkhazian residents to obtain

free healthcare in Georgia without demanding them to acquire any Georgian document. The programme proved to be successful, and as of 2016, hundreds of Abkhazians have crossed the Inguri to obtain free access to healthcare in various Georgian cities, including Tbilisi. Apparently, as a response, an agreement reached between Abkhazia's and Russia's health ministries in January 2017 will provide free access to healthcare for Abkhazian residents with a Russian passport, a move that may limit the success of Georgia's "medical diplomacy".<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusions

Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh are small, internationally unrecognised jurisdictions that are strongly dependent on a patron. External support is not only fundamental in ensuring their continued existence from a military point of view but also for enhancing the capacity of the de facto authorities to deliver services and a degree of welfare to their resident populations. Given the high ratio of state employees and pensioners in these territories, financial support from the patron is directly determinant for maintaining the livelihood of most resident households. Supporting trade and attracting investment are routinely mentioned among the priorities of the de facto MFAs, but they remain relatively less important issues than for their recognised counterparts. Obtaining international recognition remains a key goal but one that is pragmatically operationalised as an effort to improve their image and promote their perspective through online communication and offline networks of support.

Lack of external legitimacy combined with a strong dependency on a patron raise old questions about the internal legitimacy of de facto states in the region. On the one hand, the patron is a key enabler of security and public goods, without which no state authority would be considered fully as such. On the other hand, as a consequence, authorities in de facto states must not only respond to their citizens but also to those who effectively hold the purse strings. Thus, negotiating domestic demands and patron's preferences is a key challenge for authorities in de facto states. However, political, social and human needs push both authorities and individuals in these territories to complement this dominant relationship with various activities that cross de facto and de jure borders.

*See overleaf for information about the author and further reading.*

6 As of February 2017, only two ABL crossings remain open, see Civil.ge, "Gali Residents Protest Crossing Point Closure", 27 January 2017. <<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29810>>

7 Murat Gukemukhov, "Borba s kontrabandom po-osetinski", *Ekho Kavkaza*, 16 January 2017. <<http://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/28237685.html>>

8 Vitaly Shariya, "V Rossiyu, po strakhovke", *Ekho Kavkaza*, 25 January 2017. <<http://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/28259412.html>>

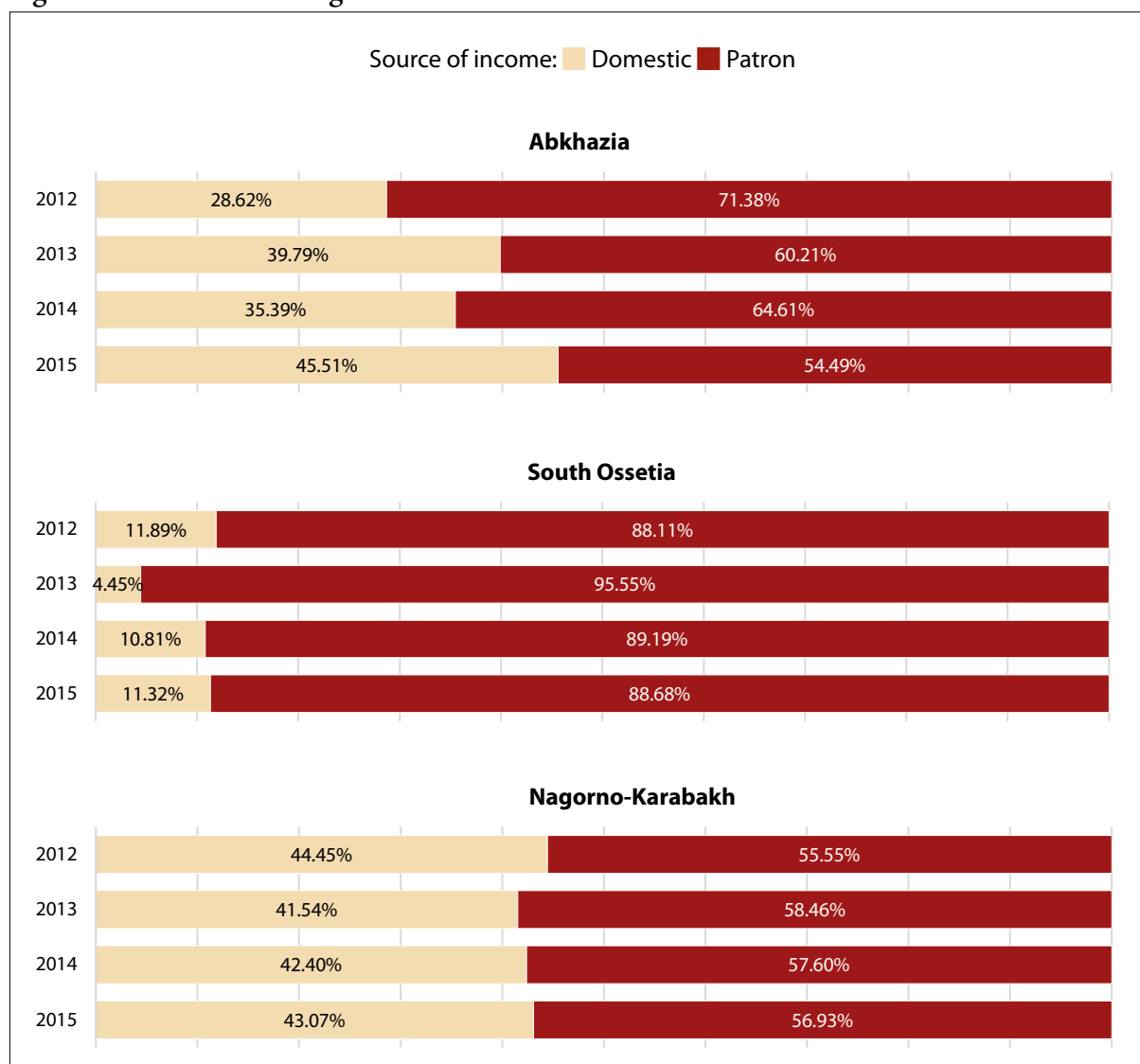
### About the Author

Giorgio Comai is a doctoral researcher at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University and a member of the Marie Curie ITN network “Post-Soviet Tensions”. His PhD thesis focuses on the external relations of de facto states in the former USSR. He has an MA in East European Studies and holds a degree in political science from the University of Bologna. From 2009 to 2013, he was a regional editor and researcher at *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*. Mr Comai has carried out research for the Institute for Central-Eastern and Balkan Europe at Bologna University and he is a member of the board of directors of ASIAC, Italy’s academic association for the study of Central Asia and the Caucasus. His research has focused on youth policies in Russia and on de facto states in the post-Soviet space.

### Further Reading

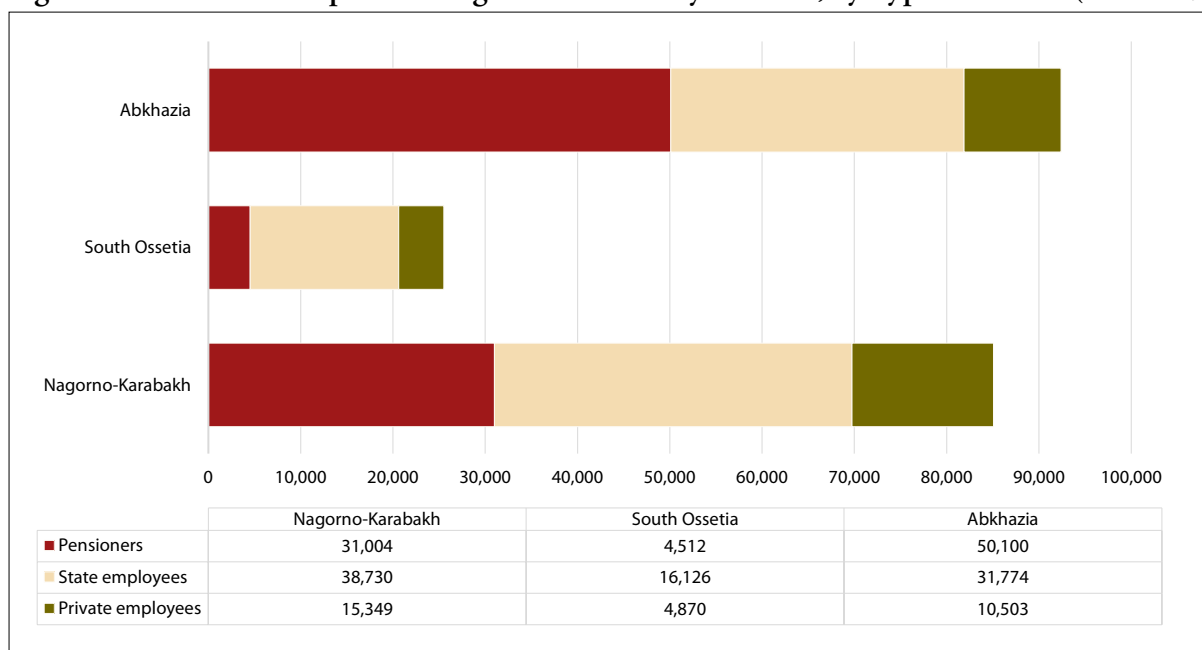
- Ó Beacháin, Donnacha, Giorgio Comai and Ann Tsurtsunia-Zurabashvili, ‘The secret lives of unrecognised states: Internal dynamics, external relations, and counter-recognition strategies’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27.3 (2016): 440–466
- Comai, Giorgio, ‘Post-Soviet de Facto States Online’ in William Schreiber and Marcin Kosienkowski (eds.), *Digital Eastern Europe*, The Jan Nowak Jezioranski College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław, 2015.

**Figure 1: Share of the Budget from Domestic Incomes and Aid in Post-Soviet De Facto States**



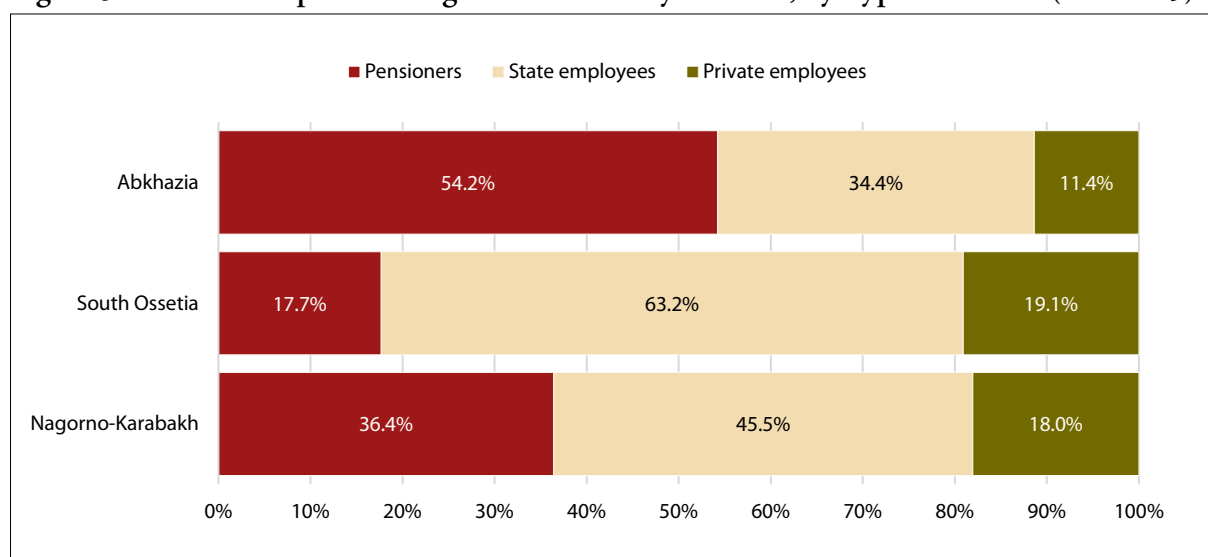
Source: Statistical yearbooks of Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh; aggregated official and media sources for South Ossetia

Figure 2: Number of People with Registered Monetary Incomes, by Type of Income (as of 2015)



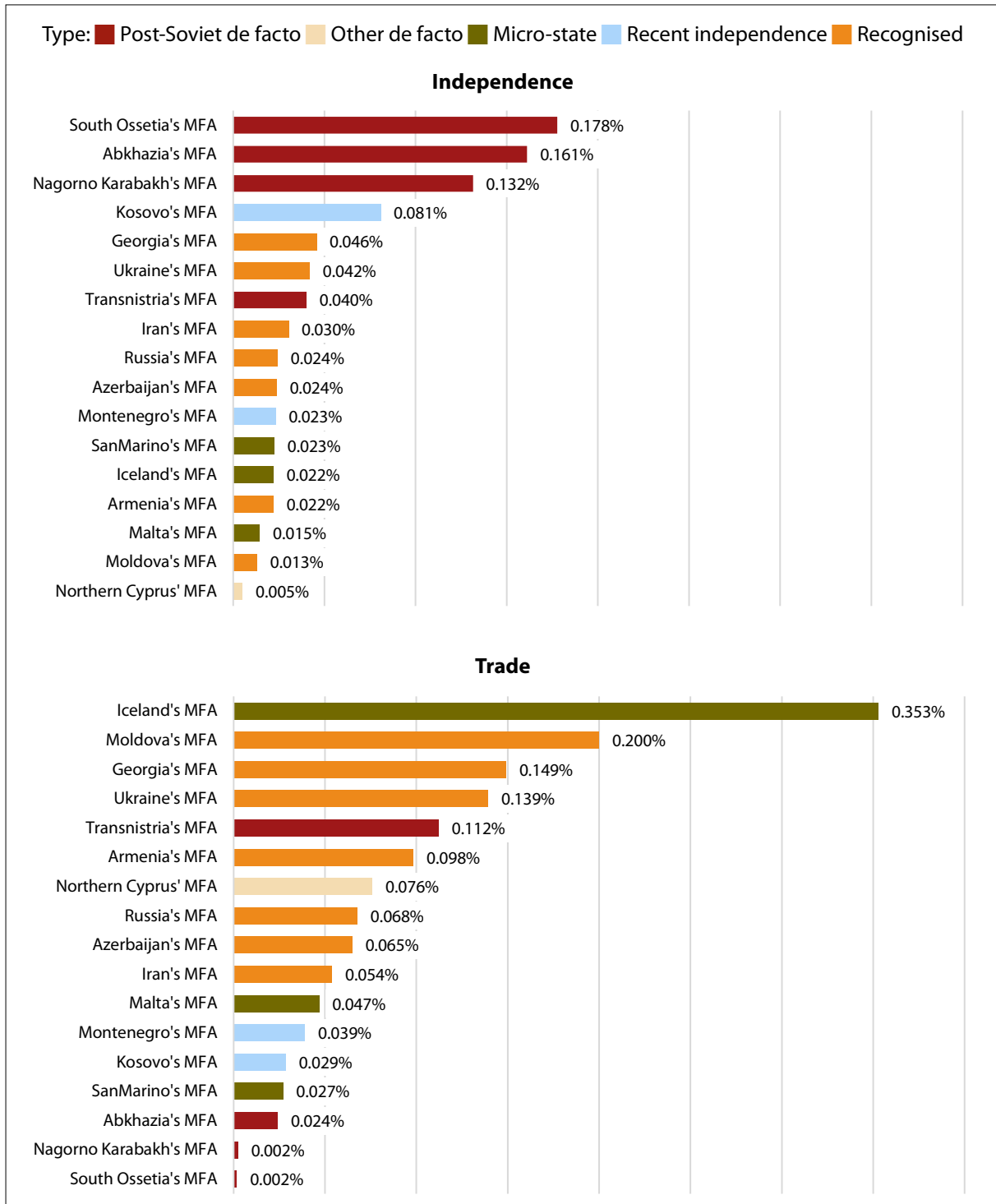
Aggregated data from relevant offices in de facto states and Russia

Figure 3: Share of People with Registered Monetary Incomes, by Type of Income (as of 2015)



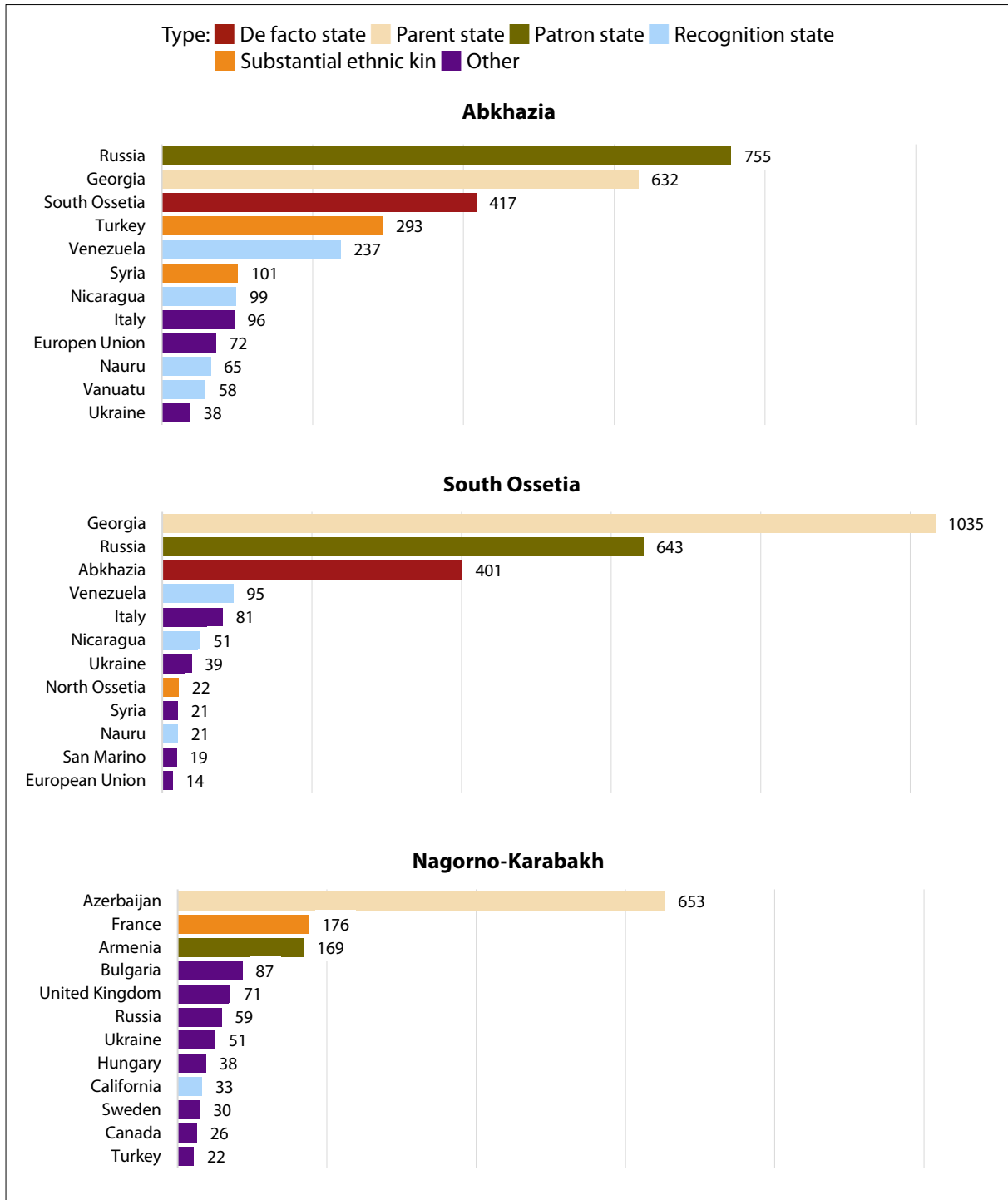
Aggregated data from relevant offices in de facto states and Russia

Figure 4: Frequency of 'Independence' and 'Trade' in Publications of Selected MFAs  
(Frequency of Term as % of All Words)



Word frequency of 'trade' and 'independence/independent' in the items published on the websites of selected MFAs between 1 July 2013 and 30 June 2016 (N = 16,584). The analysis includes MFAs of: post-Soviet de facto states (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh), other de facto states in Europe (Northern Cyprus), countries of recent independence in Europe (Montenegro and Kosovo), micro-states in Europe whose MFA has an own website (Iceland, San Marino, and Malta), parent states (Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan), other countries with which post-Soviet de facto states share a border (Ukraine, Russia, and Iran).

**Figure 5: Countries and Entities Mentioned Most Often by MFAs of Post-Soviet De Facto States (Number of Occurrences)**



Number of mentions of internationally recognised countries and other selected jurisdictions on the websites of MFAs of de facto states in the South Caucasus. This analysis includes all publications available on the respective websites as of 1 January 2017. Abkhazia's MFA: 829 publications, starting with April 2012. South Ossetia's MFA: 396 publications, starting with April 2010; Nagorno Karabakh: 522 publications, starting with November 2008. It should be highlighted that in the case of Nagorno Karabakh references to Bulgaria, United Kingdom and Hungary are almost exclusively related to the nationality of members of the OSCE monitoring team, and accordingly do not relate to any substantive relationship between Nagorno Karabakh's MFA and those countries.