# Twenty Years of de facto State Studies: Progress, Problems, and Prospects

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**In This Article**



## Summary and Keywords

It has been almost 20 years since the publication of *International Society and the De Facto State* by Scott Pegg in 1998, the first book-length substantive theoretical attempt to investigate the phenomenon of de facto states—secessionist entities that control territory, provide governance, receive popular support, persist over time, and seek widespread recognition of their proclaimed sovereignty and yet fail to receive it. Even though most de facto states are relatively small and fragile actors, in the intervening years the study of de facto or contested or unrecognized statehood has expanded dramatically. The de facto state literature has contributed significantly to the growing recognition that the international system is far more variegated than is commonly perceived. An initial focus on the external

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relations of de facto states has increasingly given way to a newer focus on their internal dynamics and domestic state-building processes and on how a lack of sovereign recognition conditions but does not prohibit their democratic, institutional, and political development. Perhaps most notably, there has been an explosion in detailed empirical research based on original data, which has greatly enriched our understanding of these entities. Alas, the subfield of de facto state studies is also characterized by recurrent problems. There has been an extensive proliferation of different terms used to describe these entities, and much fighting has erupted over precise definitions, resulting in limited scholarly progress. Fundamentally, there remains a continued failure to reach agreement on the number of these entities that exist or have existed since 1945. The nuanced and empirically rich academic literature has also largely failed to advance journalists or policymakers' understanding of de facto states. Yet, the prospects for de facto state studies remain bright. More diverse comparative work, renewed attention to how engagement without recognition might facilitate the participation of unrecognized entities in international politics, a renewed focus on parent state strategies, and increased attention to de facto states and conflict resolution are areas deserving of greater scholarly attention.

Keywords: de facto state, recognition, sovereignty, secession, self-determination, contested state, unrecognized state, empirical international relations theory

# Introduction

Twenty years ago, the study of de facto states[1] was a somewhat lonely and marginalized enterprise. Although individual cases such as Abkhazia,[2] Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, or Tamil Eelam occasionally had their 15 minutes of fame, few international relations scholars paid much attention to such places. Indeed, in many ways, *International Society and the De Facto State* (Pegg, 1998) was an extended theoretical and conceptual plea to take these entities seriously. It argued that secessionist entities that controlled territory, provided governance, received popular support, and persisted for extended periods of time without widespread recognition of their proclaimed sovereignty were a distinct type of actor in international relations that merited comparative academic study and not just ritualistic condemnation of their illegality in a world dominated by widely recognized sovereign states. It also tried to highlight some of the novel challenges raised by these entities, a point that

Broers (2013, p. 59) made very well years later when emphasizing that "*de facto* states present an existential paradox in their simultaneously transgressive and mimetic qualities: they both challenge the international state order by violating *de jure* borders, and replicate it by seeking to exhibit the normal appearance of a state."

In the intervening years, the study of de facto states has expanded dramatically. The central argument advanced here is that two decades' worth of de facto state studies have produced mixed results. On the one hand, tremendous progress has been made, and our understanding of the internal and external dynamics driving the creation, development, impact, and evolution of these entities has expanded exponentially. There is much to be proud of in the development of this nascent subfield of study. On the other hand, this subfield is characterized by significant problems, including prolonged terminological and definitional battles that have done comparatively little to advance scholarly understanding. Two decades later, we are still arguing about what to call these entities, how many of them exist, and what their prospects for survival are or are not. Thus, despite noteworthy progress, this also remains an immature subfield that has failed to generate cumulative progress across some important areas.

# Progress

At a broad level, the de facto state literature has contributed significantly to the growing recognition that the international system is far more diverse than is commonly perceived. In their critical assessment of the failed states literature, Hagmann and Hoehne (2009, p. 45) observe that "[s]cholars from traditionally state-centered disciplines such as political science or international relations have great difficulty imagining that life may continue in the absence of a state . . . The idea that state collapse is tantamount to civil strife, human insecurity and political disorder is deeply embedded in Hobbesian assumptions about the need for a Leviathan." McConnell (2009, p. 344) similarly criticizes international relations scholars for their "binary conceptualization of geopolitical entities as either nation-states or anomalies deviating from this model" with the anomalies' "existence under-theorized and their achievements under-reported." The study of de facto states has been an integral part of a larger "sovereign anomalies" literature that has contributed to the growing understanding of just "how widespread exceptions to the rule of absolute, indivisible sovereignty exercised

equally by all states can be" (Berg & Kuusk, 2010, p. 41). Thus, the study of de facto states can usefully be seen "as a stepping stone toward more comprehensive efforts at understanding the entire constellation of alternative forms of political organization in the international system" (Florea, 2014, p. 808).

## Nation-Building in De Facto States

One significant form of progress within the de facto states literature has been the increased attention paid both to the internal dynamics of these entities and to the ways in which their internal and external environments interact to produce a unique kind of actor within the international system. As Caspersen (2008, p. 23 and 25) emphasizes, "the absence of recognition does not render statehood impossible, but results in a different form of statehood . . . these entities are not just like other states without the bonus of recognition." Five specific factors have combined to shape de facto state development (Caspersen, 2008, p. 32; Kolstø, 2006, p. 730). First, the historical narrative of most de facto states highlights them as being on the victorious side of the civil war that resulted in their establishment. Second, even decades later, the sustained lack of international recognition renders that military victory precarious and existentially insecure. Third, for some de facto states, their creation entailed significant ethnic homogenization through forcible population displacement. Fourth, most de facto states (Somaliland is the big exception) depend significantly on support and assistance from an external patron state that often intervenes in their internal affairs. Finally, as places striving for acceptance into the exclusive club of sovereign states, de facto states are open to international normative pressure to behave in certain ways. These five factors can be seen at work in the specific forms of nation-building, state-building, and democratization that have taken place in de facto states.

Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2008, p. 484) define nation-building as comprising "the 'softer' aspects of state consolidation, such as the construction of a shared identity and a sense of unity in the state's population, through education, propaganda, ideology, and state symbols." Nation-building in de facto states is simultaneously shaped by memories of suffering, the posited glories of their military victories and the continued existential insecurity constitutive of nonrecognition. Military victory obviously "increases the possibility of

exploiting war memories for nation-building purposes" (Kolstø, 2006, p. 730), and most de facto states "play up the wartime experience, praising martyrs and building memorials" (Byman & King, 2012, p. 48). The central monument in Somaliland's capital city of Hargeisa is, for example, a Russian MiG fighter plane that was part of the Somali air force's indiscriminate bombing campaign against the city in the late 1980s. Yet, victory in the context of continued de facto statehood is partial. It is a source of strength and enables de facto states to school their children "in the view that the republics they inhabit not only represent ancient nations but also have been forged in the crucible of war and sacrifice" (King, 2001, p. 544). Yet, simultaneously "the separatist authorities profoundly distrust victory. They are all aware that they have won a battle, not the war" (Lynch, 2002, pp. 839–840). However psychologically taxing the existential threat of eradication may be for their residents, "[t]he risk of renewed war . . . is used to stoke nationalist sentiment" (Byman & King, 2012, p. 48). The quest for international recognition provides "a narrative around which the population can build a common political identity" (Richards & Smith, 2015, p. 1718). In general, the combination of wartime suffering, military victory, and existential threat has been an effective combination for nation-building in de facto states.

Another element that aids nation-building in some de facto states like Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is sharply increased ethnic homogenization following mass population displacement. Yet, this is not the case in all de facto states. Transnistria, for example, saw much lower levels of violence and population displacement than Abkhazia or Nagorno-Karabakh, and its population is relatively evenly divided between Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians. On many questions, the three largest ethnic groups in Transnistria have broadly similar opinions (O'Loughlin et al., 2013). In Abkhazia, even after significant displacement of the Georgian/Mingrelian population, the Abkhaz themselves constituted only 43.8% of the population according to their 2003 census and a bare majority of 50.7% of the population according to their 2011 census. Albeit with some variation, on many questions, the ethnic Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians living in Abkhazia share broadly similar views. The ethnic Georgian/Mingrelian population often displays noticeably different attitudes (O'Loughlin et al., 2011). Yet, Abkhazia's constitution requires that the president be an ethnic Abkhaz and, although no similar requirements are placed on the vice president, all vice presidents to date have been Abkhaz; Abkhaz also dominate parliament far beyond

their share of the population (Ó Beacháin, 2012, pp. 167–173). The Somaliland population is largely united in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion and yet is divided sharply by clan and subclan lineages. Although sometimes criticized as an exclusively Isaaq clan project, Somaliland has effectively incorporated the minority Gadabuursi clan into its political system, including having its second-longest serving president to date, Dahir Riyale Kahin, hail from this minority clan. It has been far less successful, however, in incorporating the Warsengheli and Dhulbahante clans into the polity (Pegg & Kolstø, 2015).

## State-Building in De Facto States

In contrast to nation-building, Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2008, p. 484) define state-building as "the establishment of the administrative, economic and military groundwork of functional states. It includes the establishment of frontier control, securing a monopoly of coercive powers on the state territory, and putting into place a system for the collection of taxes and tolls." There is a growing recognition in the de facto state literature that these entities' lack of external recognition creates some distinct problems in terms of state-building but also provides them considerable impetus to get on with the process. Caspersen (2012, p. 105) notes that "the context of non-recognition provides a powerful incentive for building an effective entity; an entity which can defend itself and which is deemed internationally acceptable."

One distinct result of their precarious international existence outside the protection of the existing norms of nonintervention and prohibitions on the use of force is the emphasis on security and fear in de facto state-building. The forcible eradications of Krajina in 1995, Chechnya in 1999, and Tamil Eelam in 2009 cast a heavy shadow over the politics of all de facto states. As explained by Lynch (2002, p. 841), "the self-declared states have no faith in the rule of law as a means to guarantee their security. Military power is seen as the only means by which to deter the metropolitan state." The typical result is a state that is top-heavy on military and security expenditures and/or has largely outsourced its security needs to an external patron state like Turkey (Northern Cyprus) or Russia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia). Ó Beacháin, Comai and Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili (2016, p. 443) note that "[c]onsidering their small size, these societies are highly militarized . . . Military training is widespread if not compulsory and standing army numbers are exceptionally high given the

diminutive populations." Caspersen (2012, p. 149) calculates that approximately 22% of the populations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are in the standing army or military reserves and that 32% of Nagorno-Karabakh's population is in the standing army or reserves, a direct reflection of Nagorno-Karabakh's more "existentially insecure" condition (Berg & Mölder, 2012, p. 537).

In the typical context of limited foreign assistance and weak economies that nonrecognition contributes to, the de facto state's emphasis on security comes at the direct expense of other expenditures such as education and health that its citizens also desperately need. In the case of Somaliland, for example, the World Bank (2014) estimates that it spent on average 51.1% of its entire government budget on security services from 2002 to 2011. In 2011, it estimates that Somaliland spent US$42.2 million on security, compared to $5.9 million on education and $2.9 million on health. The proportionally huge spending on security and the concomitant neglect of social services create significant problems for residents of de facto states who are forced to survive amidst poor schools, bad roads, and limited infrastructure. While not celebrating the neglect of social services, citizens of de facto states frequently accept this spending prioritization because security is their highest priority. As explained by Somaliland resident Mohamad Fadah, people "do not care about much else from the government. The government handles security, otherwise it faces few demands or expectations from the people" (personal interview). Phillips (2016, p. 638) concurs that "[t]he maintenance of peace was, and remains, the gravitational center of Somaliland's political settlement; it is the issue around which all other political and economic considerations orbit." For their political leaderships, "an ability to ensure their citizens' security, both from external enemies and domestic instability, is key for de facto states' internal legitimacy" (Bakke et al., 2014, p. 593).

Another distinct characteristic of de facto state-building that at least partially results from their existentially insecure status is the prevalence of "presidential systems in which the executive eclipses both legislative and judicial arms of government" (Ó Beacháin, Comai, & Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili, 2016, p. 445). In the case of the four Eurasian de facto states of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, this is frequently explained as being both a legacy of Soviet rule and consistent with regional norms of governance. Presidential dominance extends far beyond the post-Soviet cases, though. In Northern

Cyprus, the president is the external representative of the Turkish Cypriot community and is their representative in any settlement talks. In 2005, there was great excitement when two opposition parties won control of Somaliland's parliament. Yet, in the words of Mohammed Hassan Ibrahim (personal interview), "When the opposition won parliament, they realized they had nothing." Executive dominance is expected to get worse in Somaliland as presidential elections were held in 2010 and will likely be held again in 2017, while parliamentary elections have not been held since 2005.

## Benefits to the Lack of Recognition?

Although many aspects of de facto state-building such as presidentially dominated political systems and excessively high levels of security spending are not typically seen as best practices, the de facto state literature is increasingly reporting that nonrecognition and some of the things that come with it such as limited external engagement and foreign assistance can be beneficial for state-building. Obviously, those de facto states dependent on external patrons such as Abkhazia (Russia), Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia), and the TRNC (Turkey) do receive substantial external assistance and are subject to the significant external intervention into their internal affairs that can come with it. Thus, this argument that nonrecognition affords de facto states significant freedom in their state-building choices is advanced most frequently in terms of Somaliland (Bradbury, 2008; Eubank, 2012; Phillips, 2016; Richards, 2014; Richards & Smith, 2015).

Eubank (2012) argues that the lack of external assistance provided to Somaliland forced its leaders to depend on locally generated revenues. In his view, "revenue bargaining forced Somaliland's central government to accept institutional arrangements that provided safeguards against the possible rise of a predatory state" (Eubank, 2012, p. 477). Importantly, continued dependence on local revenues "provided Somaliland citizens with an ongoing mechanism for enforcing these arrangements," thus minimizing the possibility of the government deviating significantly from the constitutional order in place since 2001 (Eubank, 2012, p. 477). Walls (2009) also highlights these benefits, while noting that this was "as much a necessity imposed by a situation in which willing donors were in short supply as it was one of principle" (pp. 386–387).

The high degree of flexibility that Somaliland enjoyed during the initial decades of its state-building project stands in marked contrast to the externally dominated top-down approach pursued in southern Somalia (Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009; Leonard & Samantar, 2011; Menkhaus, 2006/2007). Phillips (2016, p. 639) maintains that in contrast to many postconflict countries "targeted by international state-building initiatives, the political settlement that limited large-scale violence in Somaliland evolved without explicit externally driven expectations, schedules or technical indicators of success." Richards and Smith (2015, p. 1722) emphasize that "This relative flexibility is possible because of, not in spite of, non-recognition."

The specific institution most commonly cited in Somaliland as reflecting this wide degree of latitude and local ownership is the *Guurti*, or upper house of parliament, where traditional clan interests are represented. The constitutional institutionalization of clan elders into a modern political system is not something that would have been recommended by international experts. Yet, as Richards (2014, p. 150) observes, "For Somaliland, the institutionalized traditional authority is not a sacrifice of acceptable statehood, but rather a necessity for acceptable statehood to be achieved in the emerging state."

The de facto state literature should not, however, be read as seeing relative autonomy and freedom from outside interference as a panacea. While generally positive about how Somaliland used its flexibility to craft political institutions tailored to its own society, Bradbury (2008, p. 93) notes that to the extent that "limited international assistance to Somaliland did delay the physical, economic and political recovery of the country, then it had human costs." Richards and Smith (2015, p. 1724) usefully note that nonrecognition "provides flexibility in state building but . . . does not preclude errors and mistakes being made." Indeed, Hoehne (2013, p. 200) argues forcefully that Somaliland's widely lauded traditional-modern hybrid system has now become "a 'crippled hybrid' in which neither state nor traditional institutions function really well . . . Democratic process is hindered and traditional legitimacy is undermined." Pegg and Berg's (2016) analysis of WikiLeaks U.S. diplomatic cables related to de facto states also cautions against a facile acceptance of the degree of latitude afforded to these entities. They found that at the height of its presidential election crisis (August–September 2009), U.S. diplomats issued 11 cables a month on Somaliland's domestic politics. Cables relating to Somaliland's domestic politics ultimately

accounted for 45.2% of all U.S. diplomatic cables on Somaliland from 2003 to 2010 (Pegg & Berg, 2016, p. 283).

## Democratization without Sovereignty

A significant component in the political development of de facto states that has attracted widespread scholarly attention concerns the prospects for democratization without externally recognized sovereignty. While much of the political science literature finds sovereignty to be a necessary component for democracy, Tansey (2011) theoretically demonstrates that democratization can take place in the absence of sovereign recognition. Utilizing Krasner's (1999) four-part conceptualization of sovereignty (international legal sovereignty, domestic sovereignty, Westphalian sovereignty/nonintervention, and interdependence sovereignty), Tansey (2011, p. 1516) shows that "sovereignty should not be viewed as a prerequisite for democracy . . . some aspects of sovereignty are crucial for democracy, while others may be of little relevance." Specifically, Tansey argues that democracy requires autonomous governments that have the authority to make binding decisions. A lack of international legal sovereignty might deny such entities various opportunities to participate in the international community or benefit from international exchange but nonrecognition itself "does not necessarily breach the core channels of accountability and representativeness that are central to democratic rule" (Tansey, 2011, p. 1535). Thus, "[d]omestic and Westphalian sovereignty can exist in the absence of international legal sovereignty, and thus democracy is not tied to official legal statehood" (Tansey, 2011, p. 1535).

As aspirants wanting to join the exclusive club of sovereign states, de facto state leaders are keenly aware of the importance many members of the international community placed on democratization in the post–Cold War era. Indeed, a central theme of the de facto state literature is how democratic legitimacy has become a core element in these entities' new legitimization strategy based on "earned sovereignty" (Broers, 2013; Caspersen, 2008, 2011; Richards, 2014; Voller, 2013). As Caspersen (2011, p. 346) explains, "the proclamation of democratic values is not a break with other legitimizing strategies; rather, it is portrayed as a natural extension. National self-determination, past grievances and democratization are constructed as creating . . . an even stronger argument

for independence." Voller (2013, pp. 77–78) usefully adds that the positive contributions to local and regional security and economic viability are additional components of the claim to have earned sovereignty. Democratization is therefore not the only element in this strategy, but it is central to de facto states' claims to have earned sovereignty "through exhibiting preferable and acceptable empirical statehood" (Richards, 2014, p. 117).

Democratization is not just a cynical strategy to win acceptance. It has taken root and made real progress in many de facto states. Abkhazia, Northern Cyprus, Somaliland, and Transnistria have all achieved peaceful electoral transfers of power from governments to oppositions. Citizens in de facto states have regularly chosen to go against the clearly understood wishes of their patron state backers on several occasions, including Abkhazia in 2004, South Ossetia in 2011, and Transnistria in 2011. Looking specifically at Abkhazia and Transnistria, Ó Beacháin, Comai, and Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili (2016, p. 447) find it "most remarkable" that "without societal upheaval, power passed from the government, along with its entrenched elites and assorted hangers-on, to a new administration composed of rival politicians and their allied personnel," a feat seldom achieved in many recognized post-Soviet states.

Democratization within de facto states is driven simultaneously by external and internal factors. Externally, de facto state leaders quickly recognized that there was an "emerging right to democratic governance" in the post–Cold War era (Franck, 1992) and that their chances for recognition would improve if they could demonstrate that they were viable democracies. This normative external commitment to democracy was seen in such things as the Badinter criteria for recognition of the former Yugoslavian republics, European Union accession criteria, and persistent U.S. foreign policy rhetoric (Caspersen, 2008). De facto states also sometimes face direct pressures or incentives to democratize. Pegg and Berg's (2016) analysis of U.S. WikiLeaks diplomatic cables, for example, demonstrates significant U.S. involvement in electoral processes in Northern Cyprus and Somaliland.

As MacQueen (2015) usefully emphasizes in the case of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, though, external factors are only a small part of what drives de facto states to democratize. Internal pressures also offer compelling incentives to democratize. MacQueen argues that, "for the KRG it has been an effort at elite consolidation over a relatively homogenous community, drawing on previous political

activity and organizations, as well as a product of the friction with the government in Baghdad that appears to have most directly fostered democratic development" (2015, p. 430). Richards and Smith (2015, p. 1729) note here that "[b]ecause of the lack of external support, the survival of the state-building processes in unrecognized states depends upon societal investment and support" which democratization can help provide.

While a lack of external recognition does not preclude democratization and may afford de facto states some autonomy in how they choose to pursue it, nonrecognition also creates unique obstacles to democratization. Caspersen (2011, p. 346) highlights the paradox that "unrecognized states suffer simultaneously from a lack of international attention and from too much international attention." The lack of international attention refers to the limited external assistance usually provided to de facto state electoral processes. Even basic democratic tasks such as registering voters or maintaining polling stations can challenge de facto states with their limited personnel and resources. Somaliland is a partial exception here, although it receives far less support from the international community than it would if it were a recognized state. Too much international attention refers to excessive meddling or interference by patron states upon whom de facto states often depend for their survival. Perhaps the two most famous cases are Abkhazia's 2004 presidential elections and South Ossetia's 2011 presidential elections. In both cases, de facto state citizens voted against the candidate obviously preferred by Moscow, precipitating political crises that were eventually resolved after extensive Russian interventions (Broers, 2013, pp. 61–62; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008, pp. 499–500; Ó Beacháin, 2012, pp. 168–169). De facto states may also face unhelpful external interventions from their parent states who try to delegitimize their democratic process as part of a larger strategy to combat their secessionist bid (Tansey, 2011, p. 1527).

The existential insecurity that accompanies nonrecognition is also not conducive to democratic development. For most de facto states, the struggle to present a united front to bolster self-determination claims can have a stifling effect on dissent and lead to censorship or self-censorship of nonindependence or pro-settlement views. Höhne (2008), for example, while noting how newspapers in Somaliland have provided invaluable forums for some sensitive public debates, lambasts them for distorting news and silencing alternative viewpoints in the contested eastern regions of Somaliland. The desire to be successful to

further the cause of international recognition is so powerful in Somaliland that it prevents any reasoned debate over the relative merits of independence versus reunification with Mogadishu (Pegg & Kolstø, 2015). Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2012) argue that given its small size and cultural homogeneity, one might expect Nagorno-Karabakh to be more democratic than it is. Yet, "[t]he ever-present possibility of renewed hostilities means that the opposition must operate within a narrowly defined political field. Self-constraint and a perceived need for outward unity is ubiquitous in Karabakhian politics" (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012, p. 149). Broers (2013, p. 60) concludes that "heavily militarized contexts . . . constrain democratization and reform processes within *de facto* states, and provide a constant foil strengthening the hand of hardliners over reformers."

Democratization in de facto states is also heavily constrained by demography. As Caspersen (2008, p. 126) notes, "There is a tension between 'ethnos' and 'demos'—between an ethnic and a civic definition of the people—and the former tends to be favored." As noted earlier, some de facto states like Abkhazia, Somaliland, and Transnistria have made significant progress in successfully incorporating various ethnic or clan groups into their respective polities. In the case of Abkhazia, this generally successful integration of the Russian and Armenian populations depends fundamentally on their acceptance of disproportionate ethnic Abkhaz domination of the political system (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2013; Ó Beacháin, 2012). More generally, though, the fact that de facto states like Abkhazia and the TRNC have achieved peaceful transfers of power from governments to oppositions via the ballot box must be placed in the context of the forcible expulsion of tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians and Greek Cypriots from their respective former homelands. Their opinions have never been consulted, and they have suffered in myriad other ways (Prelz Oltramonti, 2016). The same can also be said of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has not yet achieved a peaceful transfer of power from the government to the opposition. The fact that Nagorno-Karabakh frequently scores better on Freedom House rankings than its parent state of Azerbaijan (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012) or that Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh both compare favorably to many other post-Soviet political systems (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012; Ó Beacháin, 2012) in terms of democratization counts for nothing in the eyes of their forcibly displaced former residents. After assessing all the various obstacles de facto states face in trying to democratize, Caspersen's (2012, p. 98) pessimistic conclusion is that "unrecognized states often run out of steam and find

themselves in a seemingly perpetual transition; they make steps towards democratization but reach a plateau fairly early on and may even experience democratic setbacks."

## Data Collection and Empirical Measurements

Another fundamental area of progress within the de facto state literature has been in terms of empirical data collection and measurements. *International Society and the De Facto State* (Pegg, 1998) was a theoretical study of these entities which sought, with some success, to place de facto states on the academic radar screen and designate them as entities worthy of further comparative study. Many valuable conceptual studies have emerged in recent years. Tansey's (2011) work demonstrating how a lack of externally recognized sovereignty does not prevent democratization and Geldenhuys' (2009) comprehensive study of contested states are good examples.

Yet, there is no question that the subfield of de facto state studies has taken a significant turn toward empirically based fieldwork and various attempts to develop quantitative measurements of these entities or incorporate novel primary sources to explain them. Indeed, it is probably easier today to identify studies that are not based on fieldwork and extensive interviews than it is to identify those that are. One exemplary study in this regard is Ó Beacháin (2012), which is based on "scores of interviews conducted within Abkhazia with MPs, parliamentary officeholders (speakers of parliament and deputy speakers), presidential candidates, prime ministers and cabinet members, election officials, and NGO's leaders." These interviews were conducted over the course of a decade (2001–2011) and supplemented with election data provided by Abkhazia's Central Election Commission and the independent League of Voters (Ó Beacháin, 2012, p. 166). Kyris (2015) is another good example of a study based on, in this case, extensive fieldwork in Northern Cyprus and dozens of interviews with European Union officials and TRNC politicians, officials, and civil society leaders.

Kolstø and Paukovic (2014) is a fascinating example of a study incorporating primary source material to shed new light on the internal workings of de facto states. They used official Republika Srpska Krajina reports and documents from state archives captured in 1995 to investigate why this particular de facto state collapsed and was forcibly reincorporated into Croatia with surprising ease. Another example here is Pegg and Berg

(2016), which examines U.S.-de facto state relations based on 448 leaked WikiLeaks U.S. diplomatic cables from 2003 to 2010 involving Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Northern Cyprus, and Somaliland. Berg and Pegg (2017forthcoming) adds a fifth de facto state, Transnistria, to this list and examines U.S. decisions on whether, when, and how to engage de facto states based on the evidence found in 544 WikiLeaks U.S. diplomatic cables.

Florea (2014) is perhaps the most ambitious attempt to develop a large-N quantitative dataset on de facto states. His *De Facto States in International Politics* dataset is based on "a population of 34 de facto states between 1945 and 2011" (p. 792) and generates novel findings on de facto states' length of survival (p. 796) and their ultimate trajectories, including continued existence as a de facto state, peaceful or forcible reintegration into the parent state and graduation to sovereign statehood (p. 792, 797).

Two specific scholars arguably deserve special praise for their efforts to bring systematic or empirical sources of data to bear on de facto states. First, in addition to the two WikiLeaks studies already mentioned, working alone and with various collaborators, Berg has introduced new data into this field and developed novel indices to measure different aspects of de facto statehood. Berg (2013) draws from survey data on four different dimensions of political legitimacy in parent and de facto states in Cyprus, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and his work is based on 3657 surveys across the six different entities. Berg and Toomla (2009) develop a "normalization" index for de facto states to try to measure how isolated or integrated these entities are based on multiple political, economic, and "public sphere" measurements. Even though Kosovo is gaining sovereign recognition while Taiwan is losing it, they find both entities more integrated or normalized than any other de facto state, Northern Cyprus more normalized despite the economic embargo against it than Abkhazia which has a larger number of sovereign recognitions, and Nagorno-Karabakh by far the most isolated of all the cases they examine (Berg & Toomla, 2009, pp. 31–33). Toomla (2016) subsequently extends this work further by employing fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis to "test whether there are different necessary and sufficient causes that might lead to [a] de facto state having foreign representations on its soil." He finds that "having economic ties, a powerful patron state and basic democratic freedoms is a sufficient combination to have more foreign representations in a de facto state" (Toomla, 2016, p. 331). Berg and Kuusk (2010) develop an index to measure different degrees of sovereignty

that is based on five different features of internal sovereignty and four different features of external sovereignty. They find that de facto states constitute a more homogeneous group when it comes to external sovereignty than they do when it comes to internal sovereignty. Among their findings are that Taiwan and Abkhazia as one pair and Somaliland and the TRNC as another pair both have similar external sovereignty ratings, with the former part of each pair having noticeably higher internal sovereignty scores than the latter (Berg & Kuusk, 2010, p. 48).

The other scholar who deserves praise here is O'Loughlin and his various collaborators for the innovative random sample surveys they have conducted across the four post-Soviet de facto states of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. Their survey research in Abkhazia, for example, was based on 1000 interviews across all 170 precincts used for the December 2009 presidential elections and across all ethnicities (O'Loughlin et al., 2011). Their survey research on Moldova and Transnistria was based on over 2000 respondents across every *rayon* (county) in both entities with, 1102 respondents in Moldova and 976 in Transnistria (O'Loughlin et al., 2013). While the three main ethnic groups in Abkhazia (Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians) all overwhelmingly support (95% or higher) the continued presence of Russian troops in Abkhazia (O'Loughlin et al., 2014, p. 437), those same three groups are much more divided on the question of Abkhazia's final status, with 79% of Abkhaz but only 58% of Russians and 44% of Armenians supporting independence (O'Loughlin et al., 2011, p. 31, 32). Perhaps surprisingly, more than 60% of residents in Nagorno-Karabakh and more than 70% of residents in South Ossetia believe their republics are moving in the right direction (O'Loughlin et al., 2014, pp. 440–441). In contrast, just over one-quarter of the populations in both the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria believe their republics are moving in the right direction (O' Loughlin et al., 2013, p. 238). The work of O'Loughlin and his colleagues has set a new standard in the collection of original empirical data on de facto states.

## Engagement without Recognition

A final area of progress in de facto state studies highlighted here concerns how to deal with these entities in the absence of recognized sovereignty. In his original formulation, Pegg (1998, p. 177) argued that the international community typically responded to de facto

states in one of “three main ways: actively opposing them through the use of embargoes and sanctions; generally ignoring them; and coming to some sort of limited acceptance of their presence.” The subsequent de facto state literature has arguably made significant progress expanding and refining the ways in which these entities can be engaged positively without recognizing their claims to sovereign independence. Such strategies are increasingly labeled “engagement without recognition” (Cooley & Mitchell, 2010; Ker-Lindsay, 2015; Berg & Pegg, 2017 forthcoming).

One of the pioneering contributions here from Cooley and Mitchell (2010) explicitly advocated that the United States pursue a strategy of engagement without recognition with Abkhazia. In their argument, such a strategy would mean that “Abkhazia would be given the opportunity to engage with the West on a number of political, economic, social, and cultural issues for the purpose of lessening Russia’s influence,” even though its “status as an independent state will never be accepted” (Cooley & Mitchell, 2010, p. 60). The rationale underlying this advocacy is that “[t]he alternative is to continue to force Abkhazia to choose between either partnering with Russia or returning to Georgia, an easy choice for Abkhazia that only further accelerates Sukhumi’s absorption by Moscow” (Cooley & Mitchell, 2010, p. 66). Some of the specific components proposed for this engagement without recognition strategy include granting Abkhaz citizens visas to travel to the United States and European Union, allowing Turkish ships and planes to travel in and out of Abkhazia freely and better connecting Abkhaz nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to their Western counterparts (Cooley & Mitchell, 2010, pp. 66–69).

Ker-Lindsay (2015) is a recent seminal theoretical contribution to this literature. Ker-Lindsay (2015, pp. 276–283) addresses a range of potential concerns in bilateral relations with de facto states, including meeting their officials in the territories they control, welcoming their officials to one’s state, meeting with officials from the de facto state’s foreign ministry, and establishing nondiplomatic missions or representative offices on their territories. He flatly rejects the argument often put forward by Azeri and Greek Cypriot officials that various actions can imply recognition. In Ker-Lindsay’s view, “intent is crucial. To put it crudely, there cannot be accidental recognition. As long as a state insists that it does not recognize a territory as independent, and does not take steps that obviously amount to recognition . . . then it does not do so” (p. 284). Thus, at the bilateral level, there is “an enormously high

degree of latitude when it comes to diplomatic engagement without recognition" (p. 284). His overall conclusion is that should sovereign states wish to do so, they can "set the threshold for engagement without recognition extremely high," and, as many states have done with Taiwan, they "can even go so far as to interact with a contested state as though it were recognized in all but name" (p. 285).

While Ker-Lindsay (2015) demonstrates just how extensive a strategy of engagement without recognition could be, Berg and Pegg's work seeks to document how far the United States is or is not willing to pursue such a strategy with individual de facto states. Pegg and Berg (2016) highlight a somewhat bifurcated pattern of diplomatic activity, with the United States frequently and often warmly engaging directly with Somaliland and TRNC officials but seldom, if ever, doing so with Abkhazian or Karabakhian officials. Ker-Lindsay's (2015, p. 278) concern that "there is often a reluctance to engage with anyone attached to a foreign ministry" is seemingly belied by their finding that the United States met with or directly engaged two different foreign ministers of Somaliland on at least 23 different occasions during the period covered by the WikiLeaks cables (Pegg & Berg, 2016, p. 277). Among other things, Berg and Pegg (2017 forthcoming) find that U.S. engagement decisions with de facto states are driven more by strategic considerations with patron states than they are by sensitivities on the part of parent states; that they cannot be explained by differences between the Bush and Obama administrations but rather are often in response to critical events (e.g., the Russo-Georgian War, a presidential election crisis in Somaliland, and a drought in Transnistria); and that one can see nascent signs of an engagement without recognition strategy emerging in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, even though it is not nearly as developed as it is with Somaliland or the TRNC.

Engagement without recognition has generally been embraced by scholars working on de facto states. Looking specifically at the four post-Soviet de facto states, Broers (2013, p. 69) argues that punitive and isolationist policies "have been thoroughly tested and found sorely wanting . . . More open-ended policies are needed, which recognize the importance of internal dynamics, engage with them in a principled way and encourage exposure of the people living in *de facto* states to a range of outside influences." Byman and King (2012, p. 5) similarly note that if such entities are seen as "little more than separatists or craven beneficiaries of illicit commerce, the international community has little chance of engaging

their citizens, holding their leaders to account, and making them jointly responsible for the security and stability of their own neighborhoods." Broers (2013, p. 62) also highlights the hypocrisy of engaging Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, which "all saw harassment, mass demographic flight or deportation of whole communities in the late 1980s and early 1990s" and yet not engaging Abkhazia or Nagorno-Karabakh about which the same points can be made.

Yet, others remain skeptical that engagement without recognition will amount to much. Paquin's (2010, p. 8) study of U.S. foreign policy toward secessionist entities, for example, defines support quite narrowly as diplomatic recognition because "there is a major difference between granting diplomatic recognition and demonstrating solidarity through material and political means." Caspersen (2015) also notes that such a strategy is constrained externally by the binary division in the international system between sovereign states and everything else and internally by the importance that seeking recognition plays in securing the loyalty of the de facto state's own population.

# Problems

Despite the various forms of progress, in some ways the subfield of de facto state studies remains mired in persistent and recurrent problems. Perhaps the most obvious one is terminology. What should we call secessionist entities that control territory, provide governance, secure popular support, and aspire to widely recognized sovereign statehood and yet fail to attain it? The terminology chosen here—de facto state—seemingly failed to convince many scholars who offered such alternatives as "pseudo-states" (Kolossov & O'Loughlin, 1999), "states-within-states" (Spears, 2004), "unrecognized quasi-states" (Kolstø, 2006), and "informal states" (Isachenko, 2012). Gradually, some of these terms failed to catch on, and others were abandoned by their authors in favor of de facto states. Over time, there seemed to be a coalescing around three main terms: contested states (e.g., Geldenhuys, 2009; Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Kyris, 2015), unrecognized states (e.g., Caspersen, 2012; Richards, 2014; Richards & Smith, 2015), and de facto states (e.g., Bahcheli, Bartmann, & Srebnik, 2004; Berg, 2013; Broers, 2013; Florea, 2014; Johnson & Smaker, 2014; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012; Lynch, 2004; MacQueen, 2015; O'Loughlin et al., 2011; Pegg, 1998; Popescu, 2007; Voller, 2013; Yemelianova, 2015). Yet, even in

recent years, a proliferation of new terms continue to be seen, referring to essentially the same things. Wood (2010) collectively lambasted these entities as “limbo world.” Coggins (2014) uses “proto-state” as her preferred term of choice. Perhaps most ridiculous of all, in an otherwise informative article, Byman and King (2012) coin the silly term “phantom state,” which does nothing to clarify or add to our understanding of these entities. One hopes that Caspersen (2016) adopting the term “de facto state” might signify a larger acceptance of de facto state as “the most appropriate and most neutral” (O’Loughlin et al., 2011, p. 2) or the “least inaccurate and least offensive” (Broers, 2013, p. 69) term available, but that is probably wishful thinking. Two decades of scholarship later, our universe remains unnecessarily divided into a competing plethora of terms.

Terminological proliferation could perhaps be justified if it significantly improved our understanding of these entities. It has not. Geldenhuys (2009, p. 7), for example, notes that “[t]he defining feature of contested states is the internationally disputed nature of their purported statehood, manifested in their lack of *de jure* recognition.” Obviously, de facto states are de facto states and not just states because they lack de jure recognition. Yemelianova (2015, p. 221) raises the more pertinent critique that under the constitutive theory of recognition, international law “requires a state’s recognition by other states as the essential condition of its sovereignty. Therefore, it delegitimizes the term ‘de facto state’ on the grounds that an entity lacking international recognition could not be regarded as a ‘state’ and a subject of international law.” Thus, Crawford’s (2007, p. 464) oft-cited quote that “there is no such thing as a *de facto* State,” which Ker-Lindsay (2015, p. 268) employs as part of his argument in favor of the use of the term contested states. Crawford (2007, p. 403) considers entities such as Abkhazia, Biafra, Chechnya, Somaliland, South Ossetia, and Tamil Eelam under the heading “unsuccessful attempts at secession.” Yet, using Crawford’s quote “there is no such thing as a *de facto* State” to argue in favor of contested states or unrecognized states is either disingenuous or wrong. The problem for Crawford is not use of the adjective or modifier “de facto.” Rather, the problem for him is use of the noun “state.” That problem remains unchanged in his argument regardless of whether the modifier one prefers is de facto, contested, unrecognized, or something else. As Coggins (2014, p. 27) puts it, actors may possess various attributes such as popular support, territorial control, standing militaries, contested elections, and heads of government, yet “[w]ithout recognition, those actors may be many things: secessionists, liberation

movements, insurgents, anti-colonialists, terrorists, ethnic rebels, or indigenous peoples, but they may not be states." The clear majority of scholars working in this area accept use of the term "state" because these entities "satisfy the basic, formal requirements of statehood in international law save for recognition, they aspire to confirmed statehood, and they in many ways act like typical states" (Geldenhuys, 2009, p. 26). Rejecting the term "state" as Crawford and others do is perfectly legitimate; accepting the term "state" and fighting over the specific modifier that needs to go in front of it to signify its disputed status gets us nowhere.

## Defining De Facto States

Related to terminological proliferation, another problem plaguing this subfield has been a comparatively large amount of ink spilled over the precise definition of these entities without that many improvements to justify this effort. Yemelianova (2015, p. 221) correctly notes that Pegg's original definition of de facto states "admits some 'fuzziness' in the proposed concept." Some helpful modifications to this original definition have indeed been put forward. Caspersen (2012, p. 9), for example, usefully clarifies that unrecognized states "control at least *two-thirds of the territory* they claim, including the territory's *main city* and *key regions*," which allows for inclusion of Somaliland with its disputed control over the eastern regions of Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn but eliminates Western Sahara, which "only controls around 15 per cent of the territory it claims" (Caspersen, 2012, p. 8). Byman and King (2012, p. 45) usefully clarify one definitional component as "[a]n expressed (though not necessarily constant, consistent, or universally shared) interest in independence," which allows for entities going back and forth on sovereignty versus autonomy or biding their time and waiting to declare independence like Iraqi Kurdistan. Yet, the amount of time spent on definitional infighting has generated relatively paltry returns, particularly given that most scholars working in this subfield would broadly accept Toomla's (2016, p. 331) one-sentence definition that "de facto states are entities that fulfil the Montevideo criteria for statehood but lack international recognition."

## Numbers and Longevity of De Facto States

Perhaps more fundamentally, de facto state scholars have yet to reach consensus on exactly how many of these entities have existed or currently exist today. In some cases, their disagreements are relatively trivial. Pegg (1998) dates the start of Tamil Eelam from 1983, while Florea (2014) dates it from 1984 and Caspersen (2012) from 1986. All three scholars, though, agree that Tamil Eelam was forcibly eradicated in 2009. Whether Tamil Eelam existed for 23, 25, or 26 years is not that big a deal. On Eritrea, these same three scholars all agree that its de facto statehood ended in 1993 with its graduation to sovereign statehood, but their differences on start dates are much sharper. Florea (2014) dates the start of Eritrea's de facto statehood from 1964, while Pegg (1998) dates it from 1977 and Caspersen (2012) from 1991. Differences on overall numbers are similarly stark. Kolstø and Paukovic (2014, p. 310) find that their definitional criteria limit "the number of possible candidates for de facto statehood to about one dozen in post-Second World War history, of which roughly half are still with us today." Caspersen (2012, p. 12), in contrast, identifies 15 de facto states in existence since 1991, plus what she terms the two "borderline cases" of Kosovo and Taiwan. Seven of her cases (nine if one includes Kosovo and Taiwan) are still in existence today. Florea's (2014, p. 792) definition, however, "yields a population of 34 de facto states between 1945 and 2011," with a peak of 28 de facto states in 1995, 18 of which were still surviving at the end of 2011. Florea's figure of 28 de facto states in 1995 is more than double Caspersen's 13 (including Kosovo and Taiwan) in that same year. His identification of 34 de facto states in existence from 1945 to 2011 is double Caspersen's 17 (with only a little of that difference explained by cases like Katanga and Biafra that ended before her start date of 1991) and nearly triple Kolstø and Paukovic's "about one dozen." Caspersen and Kolstø and Paukovic's figures are much closer to each other than either is to Florea's, but after two decades of scholarship, such stark differences on cases is a fundamental problem.

Such differences also remain in terms of the continued debate over the viability or longevity of de facto states. At the time of its publication, the four cases (Eritrea, Somaliland, Tamil Eelam, and the TRNC) highlighted in *International Society and the De Facto State* averaged 15.25 years of duration (Pegg, 1998, p. 116, 251, 257). If one adds the four post-Soviet cases of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria to that list and brings the calculations up to 2016, the average duration of those eight cases would be 25.625 years.[3] Extending Caspersen's calculations on her 17 cases (including Kosovo and

Taiwan) to 2016 would generate a figure of 17.76 years. A big chunk of the difference here is readily explained by Caspersen's more comprehensive list capturing such failed de facto states as Chechnya, Gagauzia, and Krajina whose relatively short lives bring her average down. Again, in contrast, Florea (2014, p. 796) finds a mean life span for his 34 de facto states of 45.167 years, even though his dataset stops in 2011. His figure would be even higher if the dataset was extended to 2016, yet it is still almost triple Caspersen's figure and almost 20 years longer than Pegg's figure. Some of this difference is perhaps attributable to Florea's (2014, p. 791) looser definitional criteria, which allow for entities that seek "some degree of separation" and that exert "military control over . . . portions of territory." Presumably, this allows for entities that are less threatening to the central state and can more easily be tolerated than what most authors mean by de facto states. Whatever the case, the lack of agreement on terms, definitions, numbers, and longevity of de facto states remains a serious problem within this literature.

## Polemical and Politicized Discourse

A final problem highlighted concerns the polemical or highly politicized nature of studying these entities. Among some Greek Cypriot scholars and politicians, even referring to the TRNC without putting its name in quotes or using some negative qualifier such as "self-proclaimed" or "so-called" is enough to have your scholarship dismissed out of hand. While this dynamic affects all de facto states to some degree, it is most keenly felt today by scholars working on the post-Soviet de facto states. There are arguably two main variants of their concerns. First, some scholars working on these de facto states critique Western scholars for what they see as their bias against these entities. Perhaps the strongest critique in this regard comes from Yemelianova (2015). She specifically criticizes Lynch (2004) as being "compromised by its design as a set of policy recommendations to the governments of the USA and the EU on how to deal with these de facto states and with Russia's role in ethno-territorial disputes which produced these separatist regimes" (Yemelianova, 2015, p. 232). She goes on to argue more generally that "Western scholarship on the former USSR has failed to overcome Cold War ideological stereotypes of Russia and has even succumbed to a new mythology driven by its demonization" (Yemelianova, 2015, p. 234). O'Loughlin et al. (2014, p. 424) similarly argue that some

academic work on de facto states is “driven by regional antipathies and personal political penchants.”

A second problem identified by scholars working on the Eurasian de facto states is a fundamental disjunction between the academic scholarship on de facto states and the popular portrayal of these entities by journalists and policy officials. In this critique, the problem is not so much the academic scholarship on de facto states as it is the inability of that scholarship to have any significant influence on how these entities are seen in the wider world. Broers (2013, p. 64), for example, highlights what he calls a “second phase” of scholarship on de facto states beginning in the early 2000s, which saw a turn away from the idea that “external factors were all-determining” and a new focus on the “internal drivers of *de facto* statehood,” much of which is addressed under the “progress” section here. Scholars increasingly recognized that de facto states “could claim an empirical statehood, backed up with democratization indicators that compared favorably with the states seeking to re-absorb them” (Broers, 2013, p. 64). For Broers, the critical disjuncture occurs after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What he terms the “third phase” of de facto state scholarship continues largely along the same lines described in his second phase. In his phrasing, “[i]n the academic sphere there was no major rupture with the previous phase. *De facto* states continued their progress from the margins of area studies specialization to the mainstream of political science, becoming the subject of . . . diverse and empirically rich studies” (Broers, 2013, p. 65). Broers highlights some of the same progress described here and concludes that “[o]verall, a far more detailed picture of the inner workings of the region’s *de facto* states was on the table at the onset of the 2010s” (Broers, 2013, p. 66).

Yet, in the media and policy worlds, “rather than being the subjects of their own historical narratives,” Abkhazia and South Ossetia were instead “allocated walk-on parts in a master-narrative of Russian expansionism” (Broers, 2013, p. 61). Once geopolitical rivalry became the dominant way to frame understanding of de facto states, the rich academic scholarship on these entities was ignored. Instead, de facto states were “often understood in terms of what they *symbolize*, rather than what they *are*” (Broers, 2013, p. 69). One problem with this view is that it neglects the desire for autonomy or independence from their patron states that has been demonstrated in many de facto states. Presidential elections in Abkhazia in

2004, South Ossetia in 2011, and Transnistria in 2011 all saw de facto state residents elect presidential candidates not favored by Moscow (Broers, 2013; Caspersen, 2008; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008; Ó Beacháin, 2012; O'Loughlin et al., 2014). Referencing South Ossetia specifically, O'Loughlin et al. (2014, pp. 436–437) wryly observed that "[e]ven in the smallest and most dependent of all post-Soviet unrecognized republics, there are sometimes limits to Moscow's influence."

A second main problem with the "tabloid geopolitics" (O'Loughlin et al., 2014, p. 451) of viewing de facto states primarily as pawns in a larger geopolitical rivalry is an unfortunate tendency to homogenize them and a concomitant failure to appreciate their diversity. After considerable population displacement, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and the TRNC all now have highly homogenized ethnic populations; Abkhazia and Transnistria do not. The violence, death, destruction of property and population displacement that accompanied the creation of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia was dramatically less pronounced in Transnistria (Broers, 2013, p. 60; O'Loughlin et al., 2014, p. 444). Turkish Cypriots have been militarily protected from forcible eradication since 1974, while Abkhazia and South Ossetia only received such protection in 2008 and Nagorno-Karabakh and Somaliland still face much higher levels of existential insecurity. Abkhazia, Somaliland, and the TRNC have all seen peaceful transfers of power from government to the opposition; Nagorno-Karabakh has not. Somaliland and Nagorno-Karabakh have much greater levels of diaspora support than other de facto states. Yemelianova (2015, p. 225) notes that Donetsk, Lugansk, and Transnistria are all located on the plains in the western part of the former Soviet Union, have relatively large populations, and have much longer histories under Russian control than the parent states they are trying to secede from, while Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia are all located in the mountainous Caucasus region, have much smaller populations, and have experienced similar lengths of Russian/Soviet domination to their parent states. Ó Beacháin, Comai, and Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili (2016, p. 443) observe that "[e]conomically, they range from industrialized Transnistria and agriculturally rich Abkhazia to underpopulated South Ossetia whose economy barely registers a heartbeat." Such diversity is seldom acknowledged or highlighted in media or policy portrayals of de facto states, although Pegg and Berg (2016) demonstrate that at least the U.S. government is quite capable of distinguishing between individual de facto states in terms of how it engages them.

# Prospects

Rather than summarize the various forms of progress and continued problems in de facto state scholarship described earlier, by way of conclusion, some interesting prospects for future research are highlighted. In one of the earlier contributions to this literature, Lynch (2002, p. 832) lamented that "[m]uch analysis has been directed to individual cases of conflict in the former Soviet Union; however, there has been virtually no comparative study of the separatist states." That might have been true at the time he wrote it, but comparative work on some or all the post-Soviet de facto states has since exploded (Berg & Mölder, 2012; Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012; Broers, 2013; Broers, Iskandaryan, & Minasyan, 2015; Caspersen, 2008; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008; Lynch, 2004; Markedonov, 2015; O'Loughlin et al., 2014; Popescu, 2007; von Steinsdorff, 2012; Yemelianova, 2015). Indeed, arguably the problem today is not a dearth of comparative work on the post-Soviet cases but rather a dearth of comparative work involving other cases. There are two distinct problems here. First, the Eurasian focus often leaves other contemporary or historical de facto states like Somaliland, Tamil Eelam, and the TRNC to be treated in isolation. Second, the obvious advantages, incentives, or rationales to compare the post-Soviet cases also leads to de facto states being treated separately from adjacent phenomena like the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (MacQueen, 2015; Voller, 2013), the nonsecessionist Puntland, the Tibetan government-in-exile (McConnell, 2009), or their respective parent states.

There are, of courses, exceptions. Berg (2013) and O'Loughlin et al. (2013) were both innovative in doing comparative work on de facto states and the respective parent states they are trying to secede from. Ker-Lindsay (2012) is an important work that comparatively considers parent state strategies for dealing with Abkhazia, Kosovo, South Ossetia, and the TRNC. All this work suggests that a further focus on parent states or parent state–de facto state dynamics would be welcome. As Broers (2013, p. 69) puts it, "Systematic comparison of Georgian and Azerbaijani state strategies vis-à-vis unresolved territorial conflict (and with those of other central state authorities facing secessionist bids) and their respective impacts would also be a welcome addition to the literature."

*Isachenko (2012) is a comparative investigation of Transnistria and the TRNC, while Johnson and Smaker (2014) compare secessionist Somaliland with nonsecessionist Puntland and Hagmann and Hoehne (2009) innovatively compare Somaliland, Puntland, south-central Somalia, and the Somali territories in Ethiopia. Wilson and McConnell (2015) examine the construction of legitimacy without legality in the non-de facto states of Western Sahara and Tibet. There is far more scope for such interesting and novel comparative work in the future. Democratization in Abkhazia, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Somaliland would seem ripe for comparison, as would how the removal of existential insecurity in Abkhazia in 2008 and in the TRNC in 1974 affects their political development. Kolstø and Paukovic's (2014) fascinating study on the collapse of Krajina suggests future comparative work along these lines examining such cases as Biafra, Chechnya, and Tamil Eelam. We need more comparative work on the post-Soviet cases, but we also need more comparative work that goes beyond them to other de facto states and/or other adjacent phenomena.*

*We could also use more work on whether and how changes in the international system may affect the likelihood of the creation, continued existence, or prospects for the peaceful reintegration or violent eradication of de facto states. The work highlighted in the progress section on how international norms have helped shaped democratization in de facto states is one area that has received significant attention. Another area that has received scholarly attention has been the whole question of whether the Western-led recognition of Kosovo or the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has weakened the strong international normative consensus against secession in favor of territorial integrity (Caspersen, 2015; Crawford, 2007; Fabry, 2012; Ker-Lindsay, 2013). There is a strong consensus among these scholars that post–Cold War state practice is not more favorable to secessionist aspirants than Cold War practice. Crawford (2007, p. 415), for example, argues that despite the emergence of nearly two dozen new states, "the extreme reluctance of States to recognize or accept unilateral secession outside the colonial context . . . has not changed since 1989." Instead, "the practice has been powerfully reinforced." Ker-Lindsay (2013, p. 832) concurs that "the end of the Cold War, while apparently creating challenges to the notions of sovereignty and territorial integrity, actually served to reinforce the traditional views on secession."*

It is widely held that great powers prioritize state interests in making recognition decisions (Caspersen, 2015; Coggins, 2014; Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Looking at Kosovo, Caspersen (2015, p. 397) observes that “political considerations clearly predominated, while normative standards were relegated to arguments available to use by great powers if it suited their strategic interests in particular circumstances.” Ker-Lindsay’s (2013) effective dismantling of the various Western arguments justifying Kosovo as a “unique case” supports this position. Coggins (2014, p. 206) more generally concludes that “[s]tate interest, rather than facts on the ground determine recognition and, collectively, whether the secessionist actor will be admitted full membership in international society.” Fabry (2012) extends this thinking into the future and argues that the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will lead to much greater Western caution on recognizing any future Kosovos without consent from the parent state and that the fact that none of these cases of recognition has led to a stable resolution of the respective underlying conflicts also militates strongly against future contested recognitions.

Perhaps the most interesting systemic argument yet advanced comes from Fazal and Griffiths (2014). They find that the incidence of secession is significantly higher after 1945 than before it. Their explanation is that “changes in the post–1945 international system have created or enhanced incentives to gain statehood,” which has “altered the strategic environment in which aspiring nations evaluate the costs and benefits of secession” (Fazal & Griffiths, 2014, p. 88). Specifically, things like the development of the foreign aid regime, the economic benefits that come from recognition, and the enhanced normative consensus supporting territorial integrity have all significantly increased the benefits to sovereign statehood. Yet, the increased emphasis on democratization means that “the current politics of recognition discourage the use of violence by secessionist groups” (Fazal & Griffiths, 2014, p. 97). Putting the increased incentives for secession together with the decreased incentives for violence, Fazal and Griffiths (2014, p. 98) predict that “[s]ecessionism might become more peaceful, but also more persistent, populating an area of not-quite-international relations with a growing number of would-be states eager to work with and through international institutions.”

Their argument leads into a final area that may present bright prospects for future research into de facto statehood which is investigating their possible benefits for conflict resolution.

As Caspersen (2016, p. 12) observes, the prevalent view "in the existing literature is that the existence of de facto states prolongs a conflict and poses a significant, possibly insurmountable, obstacle to a negotiated solution." As examples of this view, Lynch (2002, p. 832) identified the four post-Soviet de facto states as "the main reason for the absence of progress towards settlement," while King (2001, p. 551) poignantly noted that "once the accoutrements of statehood have been put into place, they are extremely difficult to deconstruct. Why be mayor of a small city if you can be president of a country?"

Yet, the view that de facto states should not be seen in wholly negative terms as problems to be solved but rather might offer some benefits to the international community dates to the beginning of this literature with Pegg (1998, pp. 192–200) asking the question "does the *de facto* state have utility for international society?" and arguing that de facto states may indeed have utility "as a messy solution to a messy problem" (p. 194) and that "a *de facto* state solution may not be the worst option available to international society" (p. 196). Looking specifically at Kosovo in subsequent work, Pegg (2000, p. 99) postulated that "the *de facto* state is well suited to situations where the international community needs to be seen to be upholding cherished norms, while at the same time finding creative or ad hoc ways of getting around those very same norms." Spears (2004) was another early proponent of the idea that de facto states might have conflict resolution potential. In his argument, "acknowledgment, toleration, or even encouragement of states-within-states can be a valuable interim strategy in the management of civil conflict," and it is plausible that "states-within-states can provide an important foundation on which a broader regional peace can be built" (Spears, 2004, p. 29). More recently, Berg and Toomla (2009, p. 44) also suggest that openness to engagement with the status quo might offer the international community more positive results than "favoring often illegitimate and in many cases dysfunctional power-sharing options or proposing a reinforced unification agenda—usually achieved by military means."

Perhaps the most interesting recent contribution that focuses on the prospects and challenges of resolving conflicts with de facto states is Caspersen (2016). Following King's logic of why be mayor of a city when you can be president of a country, Caspersen acknowledges that de facto states might initially make reaching a settlement more difficult. Yet, she argues that if an agreement is somehow reached, "the effect on the post-

settlement phase is more likely to be positive" (Caspersen, 2016, p. 15). She makes this argument for two main reasons. First, one problem identified in the civil war literature is the problem of multiple factions or splinter groups making reconciliation more difficult. Second, another problem is authorities in the conflict zone not having sufficient capacity to deliver on any promises made or to defeat any spoilers that seek to wreck the settlement. Caspersen suggests that de facto states with their relatively high degrees of territorial control, governance, and popular legitimacy could potentially make viable partners and "could provide a good basis for sustainable peace, especially if they have institutionalized a degree of diversity" (Caspersen, 2016, p. 16).

One specific area in need of further research in terms of the conflict resolution potential of de facto states concerns their civil societies. Kyris (2015) highlights how key elements within Turkish Cypriot civil society aligned to provide vital support to the pro-settlement forces. Berg and Pegg (2017 forthcoming) document the United States' greater willingness to engage civil societies in some de facto states like Abkhazia and Transnistria where their relations with governments remain much frostier. Kopecek, Hoch, and Baar (2016) is a pioneering study that examines four civil society organizations in Nagorno-Karabakh to investigate how they positively or negatively influence the prospects for conflict resolution. An increased focus on the civil societies within de facto states would both improve our understanding of these entities and potentially suggest new avenues for engaging them on matters of common concern.

Two decades of research into de facto states have generated impressive progress, particularly on the internal dynamics of their state-, nation-, and institution-building processes. We have dramatically more and better empirical data on these entities than ever before. Yet, significant problems remain, including a basic failure to agree on what to call these entities and on how many of them exist in the world at any given time. Academic scholarship has also failed to shift dominant and largely negative narratives about these entities in the policy and media spheres. More diverse comparative work, a renewed openness to the conflict resolution potential of de facto states and an enlarged focus on their respective civil societies all suggest interesting prospects for future research that should generate significant returns in the coming years.

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## Notes:

(1.) This study primarily uses the term “de facto state.” Other terms such as contested states, unrecognized states and states-within-states are also frequently used to mean basically the same thing and are largely interchangeable in the context of this study.

(2.) This study uses common English spellings such as Abkhazia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria rather than more precise translations (e.g., Nagorny Karabakh, Pridnestrovie). In doing so, the intent is neither to elevate or denigrate the standing of these entities nor to prioritize the interpretation of one side of a conflict over that of another.

(3.) This is based on Eritrea (1977–1993), Tamil Eelam (1983–2009), and the TRNC starting in 1975, Nagorno-Karabakh and Somaliland starting in 1991, and Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria starting in 1992 and continuing into 2016.

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