

*Center for Strategic and International Studies
Russia and Eurasia Program*

“Elections in De Facto States: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria”

Tuesday, April 16, 2013

Speaker:

Dr. Donnacha Ó Beacháin, *Lecturer, School of Law and Government, Dublin City University*

Discussant:

Dr. Sergey Markedonov, *Visiting Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies*

Moderated by:

Dr. Jeffrey Mankoff, *Deputy Director and Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies*

Dr. Ó Beacháin’s presentation charted the development of electoral politics in post-Soviet unrecognized and partially recognized de facto states—namely Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria. He provided an overview of the presidential elections in Abkhazia in August 2011, Transnistria in December 2011, and Nagorno-Karabakh in July 2012, with a complementary focus on the 2012 parliamentary elections in Abkhazia. His presentation provided an assessment of the dynamics of electoral politics within these three unrecognized or partially recognized post-Soviet states. Dr. Ó Beacháin’s counterintuitive conclusion from these comparative studies was that these elections were more competitive and unpredictable than elections in many of the *de jure* states in the region.

He also added a disclaimer about the term “de facto states,” particularly as the region and the issues and conflicts of de facto states arouse passions in people and it is impossible to find a set of words that will satisfy all parties. Dr. Ó Beacháin noted that the terminology he employs is standard usage, and does not imply any political leanings or an acceptance of one side or another.

Dr. Ó Beacháin continued by describing the electoral processes of the four most recent elections in the three de facto states. The first Abkhazian presidential election took place in 1994 and, in just one decade, Abkhazia has already witnessed a peaceful transfer of power from the Kremlin favorite Raul Khadjimba to opposition leader Sergei Bagapsh in 2004. This was quite surprising, given that Georgia, the state from which Abkhazia seceded, had never had a peaceful transfer of power at that point, as Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in the 1990s and Shevardnadze was overthrown in 2003. Abkhazia managed to have this democratic transition occur successfully,

despite being located in a challenging political neighborhood and having a lack of international recognition. However, there are aspects of the Abkhazian presidential elections that may put them in a less favorable light. For example, there are strict criteria for presidential candidate eligibility. Only an ethnic Abkhaz, fluent in the Abkhaz language and between the ages of 35 and 65 can run for president. These criteria exclude a large amount of the general population living in Abkhazia.

The most recent presidential election in 2011 was an unexpected snap election, triggered by Sergei Bagapsh's death. Dr. Ó Beacháin provided an overview of each of the candidates running for the presidency:

- *Alexander Ankvab*: Bagapsh's vice president, Ankvab chose not to run a major campaign. Dr. Ó Beacháin referred to Ankvab as the "anti-candidate" because of his inability to conduct rudimentary electioneering, as evident by his lack of traditional campaign methods and refusal to use campaign slogans and posters. This was not necessarily detrimental to Ankvab's odds, since Abkhazia has a very small political community and thus active campaigning is not as essential. Ankvab's vice presidential candidate was Mikhail Logua, an ethnic Abkhaz (although being ethnic Abkhaz is not a requirement for the vice presidency).
- *Raul Khadjimba*: Khadjimba was the Kremlin favorite and marketed himself as a pro-Russian candidate in the 2004 presidential election, in which he was defeated. In the 2011 elections he recast himself as an Abkhaz nationalist candidate. He worked on capturing the Abkhaz nationalist vote by promoting ideas such as property rights, discussing the issue of creeping annexation from Russia, language encroachment and other ethnic Abkhaz issues. This was quite a reversal from his platform in 2004. Khadjimba chose Svetlana Jergenia as his vice presidential candidate. While this would seem to lend his campaign an air of progressiveness as female politicians are not common in the patriarchal system of Abkhazia, she was the wife of the former president of Abkhazia Vladislav Ardzinba and was chosen to provide a linkage to a previous war hero.
- *Sergei Shamba*: Shamba, the long-time foreign minister of Abkhazia, along with his vice presidential candidate Shamil Adzynba, ran a very professional, western-style campaign and appropriated the term "change" for his platform. Despite the fact that he worked in the government for fourteen years, he withdrew strategically from the government just before the elections to present himself as an outsider. Shamba portrayed himself as a politician for the 21st century who would usher in a new generation of politicians into the country's political arena. He relied on a diverse team of delegates from various professions and ethnicities to appeal to all parts of the electorate during public meetings and campaign rallies. Due to the small size of Abkhazia, these events with the electorate proved to be an effective way of campaigning.

There are three major political parties in Abkhazia: United Abkhazia was the party of Bagapsh and backed Ankvab; the Forum of National Unity of Abkhazia was Raul Khadjimba's party; the Party of Economic Development of Abkhazia is the party of Beslan Butba, the richest man in Abkhazia, and backed Shamba. In terms of the campaign itself, the Kitovani interview was a turning point. Tengiz Kitovani was a Georgian defense minister from the 1990s and is widely hated by Abkhazians as they believe he started the 1992 Georgia-Abkhazia conflict. In an interview, he claimed that Ankvab had cooperated with Kitovani (you mean Georgia, right?)

during this war, which effectively accused Ankvab of treason. Shamba denied any involvement in a campaign against Ankvab, but it was clear Shamba would benefit from the campaign. Ultimately, this backfired and cost Shamba numerous votes, because in such a politically small society as Abkhazia serious accusations are unpopular with the electorate. In the end, Shamba's campaign tactics of appealing to a wide range of the electorate during campaign meetings did not work, as he received only 21.02 percent of the vote, close to Raul Khajimba's 19.82 percent. With a 71.92 percent voter turnout in the first round, Ankvab received 54.90 percent of the vote.

In March 2012, the Abkhazian parliamentary elections took place and proved to be highly competitive, despite a relatively low turnout rate of about 44 percent due to the system's emphasis on the presidency and not the parliament. The highly competitive nature of the process is due to the nature of the parliamentary system in Abkhazia. The parliamentary elections are a second-ballot system, as are the presidential elections. It is not a party-oriented process since electoral law prevents parties from running a majority of the seats. The maximum number of candidates that a party can put forward is eleven. The parliament consists of 35 seats total, thus the system prevents a one-party legislature from occurring. The larger parties like United Abkhazia and Khadjimba's Forum of the National Unity of Abkhazia put forward eleven candidates each, with smaller parties such as the Communist party putting forward fewer.

Nevertheless, there were numerous candidates, which fragmented the vote and created hotly contested elections. However, the elections were not very competitive in terms of gender; all but one of the parliamentary seats were won by men in 2012. In terms of ethnic breakdown of the elections, major demographic changes occurred within the country in the past decade, resulting in a narrow majority of ethnic Abkhaz in the country. The proportion of the nation's ethnic Abkhaz population increased from 43.8 percent in 2003 to 50.71 percent in 2011, and this was a significant jump from 2003. This may be partially explained by interethnic marriages that allow non-ethnic Abkhaz spouses to claim Abkhaz ethnicity on the census to gain greater preferential treatment or government benefits. The parliamentary system is dominated by the ethnic Abkhaz, and the new Parliament does not have any Russian members. Rather than uphold a sort of "gentlemen's agreement" in the electoral process in 2007 in which ethnic Abkhaz agreed not to compete for votes in the districts where Russians were numerically strong, in 2012 the country decided to reject this principle.

Another aspect of the parliamentary elections was the high turnover rate; in the 2012 elections only five incumbents of the 35 MPs were able to hold onto their seats. The majority either did not run or were unsuccessful, and those who were successful had to fight for second-round votes. Overall, the most striking feature of the 2012 parliamentary elections was the high level of competition.

Dr. Ó Beacháin then moved on to discuss the 2011 presidential elections in Transnistria. The elections in Transnistria were different from their counterparts in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh in that there were no observable term limits. Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh had both observed a two-term limit, whereas in Transnistria the president was running for his fifth term in office.

The first round of the election had six candidates:

- *Igor Smirnov*: Smirnov was the incumbent candidate and projected himself as a state-builder and the “founder” of Transnistria. He promised that he would usher in a renewed era of prosperity and would change the country for the better. Once supported by the Kremlin in previous elections, he no longer enjoyed this endorsement because the Kremlin wanted him to retire and he refused to do so. As a result, Russian state-controlled television launched a smear campaign against him, accusing him of misappropriating funds intended for pensioners for his own private gain.
- *Anatoly Kaminski*: Kaminski was a new candidate with strong chances of defeating Smirnov because he enjoyed Kremlin’s support. However, Kremlin’s favor was not based on a strong relationship with Kaminski, but on a desire to choose the second most powerful figure in Transnistria’s government after Smirnov. This turned out to be a mistake for the Kremlin, as Kaminski was a very poor candidate.
- *Yevgeny Shevchuk*: Shevchuk was a former Speaker of Parliament and former leader of the Renewal Party, who left Parliament in 2009 largely because he was unhappy with Smirnov’s rule. He cast himself as an agent of change and an outsider, and had the reputation of a reformer.
- Other minor candidates were Oleg Horzhan, Andrei Safonov, and Dmitry Soin.

The presidential campaign was characterized by black PR, with advertisements portraying the candidates in poor light. Smear campaigns aside, the nation’s first televised presidential debate also played a crucial role in swaying public opinion, which took place only among four candidates. Smirnov and Kaminski decided not to participate in the event and as a result Shevchuk fared especially well.

In the first round of the presidential elections, Evgeny Shevchuk led with 38.53 percent of the vote. Anatoly Kaminski followed second with 26.48 percent. Shockingly, Igor Smirnov did not make it into the top two, coming in third with 24.82 percent of the vote. It is remarkable for an incumbent in a de facto state not only to lose, but also to not make it even into the second round.

Due to their success in the first round election, Shevchuk and Kaminski advanced to the second round. The results of the first round encouraged the electorate to flock to the leading candidate Shevchuk, thus increasing his margin of victory in the second round. Additionally, Kaminski’s poor performance in the second presidential debate led to Shevchuk’s easy win. As a result, Shevchuk won with 73.88 percent of the votes. Kaminski’s vote share decreased from the first round down to 19.67 percent.

Dr. Ó Beacháin then discussed the 2012 presidential elections in Nagorno-Karabakh. The election had initially four candidates. Bako Sahakyan was the incumbent candidate. Vitaly Balasanyan was a former deputy defense minister, a former presidential advisor, and a member of the National Assembly. Additionally, Balasanyan was a war hero, which is very important to the Nagorno-Karabakh electorate. As a result, he was a very strong challenger, especially with the support of the 2007 opposition presidential candidate Masis Mayilyan. There were also two pseudo-opposition candidates in 2012, Arkady Sghomonyan and Valery Khachatryan – a common phenomenon in post-Soviet politics to create an impression of political competition. Sghomonyan was a deputy rector of a local university and Khachatryan was a non-employed pensioner who later withdrew his candidacy in support of Sahakyan. With 73.64 percent voter turnout, Sahakyan gained 64.65 percent of the popular vote, thereby winning the election.

However, Balasanyan had an unprecedented 31.53 percent vote share, the highest ever in Nagorno-Karabakh for an opposition candidate.

Overall, the experience of all three de facto states shows that, despite a common perception that electoral results in such states are determined by external powers, the elections are competitive with often unpredictable results. This should not be taken for granted in post-Soviet elections. This competitiveness is also not a mere impression created by local governments. Hence, patron states are not as influential as often suggested. These elections provide a legitimate mechanism for local populations to select government leaders and address domestic issues, such as healthcare, education, and road infrastructure. During the electoral campaigns, these domestic topics took precedence over the discussion of war and great power influences; thus, indicating that considering these de facto states as smaller pawns in greater geopolitical games and excluding any domestic agency would be an oversimplification.

Dr. Markedonov agreed with Dr. Ó Beacháin's assessment of the importance of internal political processes in de facto states. Understanding de facto states is crucial for fully understanding post-Soviet political transformations. The existence of de facto states reflects the gap between formal judicial issues and practices. From a formal judicial point of view, there is nothing to discuss since Abkhazia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh are not formally internationally recognized by most of the UN members. But in reality these states do exist. Such an existence indicates the incomplete process of post-Soviet statehood not just judicially, but historically as well.

Analysis of de facto states has typically been considered primarily from three overly simplistic perspectives:

- *Geopolitical*: The political processes in de facto states are a part of geopolitical rivalries between greater powers.
- *Conflict*: The states are seen only through the prism of conflicts, seen as only temporary entities and “breakaway” republics thereby suggesting that their de facto independence is temporary.
- *Control*: The internal politics in these states are viewed as being controlled by foreign agents, such as the Armenian lobby, the Kremlin, or other external influences.

As a result, much of the current analysis ignores or overlooks key dynamics of these states, such as transfers of power, political opposition, freedom of expression and political competition. Consequently, analysts often mistakenly consider populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be an organized army following Moscow's orders. On the contrary, Sergei Bagapsh was elected as the president of Abkhazia in 2004 against Russia's wishes. Similarly, in 2011 Eduard Kokoity's opponent in the presidential election Lyudvig Chibirov was supported by Moscow. Despite Moscow's preferences, Kokoity won that election.

Domestic dynamics in the de facto states are more complicated and complex than are generally perceived. The electoral campaigns of these de facto states have their own purpose, which is frequently ignored, but the major goals are notable. The first goal is to send a message to the international community that these states do indeed exist regardless of absence of recognition. The second is to win the competition with their “parental” states and to prove themselves to be

better than their “parental” states in terms of more refined, democratic and equal political processes. The last goal is to maintain freedom not just in terms of freedom or independence from external forces but internal freedom from dictatorships or unfree regimes. This topic was an important issue in 2012 South Ossetia presidential elections. Local voters were outspoken about how the independence secured from Georgia was not achieved for serving Kokoity’s clan.

Dr. Markedonov also pointed out a lack of information on South Ossetia in Dr. Ó Beacháin’s presentation. While South Ossetia is different from Abkhazia, and while Abkhazia has more resources to maintain its independent statehood, it still aspires to be its own state. South Ossetia has requested qualitative governance and choice, even though it appears to be less democratic than Abkhazia today. However, this was not always the case. In the early 1990s South Ossetia also experienced successful transfers of power, from Lyudvig Chibirov to Eduard Kokoity, but the shift to a dictatorship was prompted by the restart of conflict in 2004.

Consideration of the de facto states as diversified phenomena, as independent, different entities is crucial. Consequently, as far as greater geopolitical actors are concerned, even Russia’s approach to each of these states varies, thereby highlighting the differences between each of the de facto states. For instance, Russia recognizes South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but not Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus, analyzing domestic developments in each of these states as separate entities is valuable.

Discussion

The discussion opened with a question from Dr. Mankoff about what commonalities may exist between the three de facto states, seeing as the presentation highlighted the differences between each of the states and how the electoral processes differ. Dr. Ó Beacháin was reluctant to draw conclusions about commonalities about the states because it tends to lend itself to supporting the typical analysis of such territories as simply de facto states and not individual, dynamic entities. Recognized states have commonalities as well, but the discourse does not necessarily compare them in the same way it does de facto states.

The next question asked about the role of geopolitics in influencing the internal dynamics of the de facto states. Dr. Ó Beacháin said that dependency on external state actors, as in the case of Transnistria, does not preclude the existence of political processes. If external influences were the only determinant of internal processes, this logic would also have to hold true for recognized states as well. While geopolitical influences are also important, Dr. Ó Beacháin’s study focused on the dynamics of domestic electoral campaigns. Dr. Markedonov added that the influence of geopolitical dynamics varies in each case. For instance Russia does not share a common border with Transnistria, but it does with Abkhazia. Another difference is Ukraine’s support of Transnistria’s independence, but the absence of this support in the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Hence, geopolitical interests vary in each case, but the issue is even more complex and domestic factors still play an important role, because local elections help legitimize unrecognized governments in the eyes of local populations.

The following question regarded the reaction of Tbilisi, Baku, and Chişinău to Dr. Ó Beacháin’s work. Dr. Ó Beacháin said that in its interactions with the European Union and the United States,

Georgia tries to present Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a Russia-against-Georgia issue. Internally, however, Georgia has displayed a much more nuanced understanding of the de facto state complexity and Georgian officials were not hostile to Dr. Ó Beacháin's work. Azerbaijan has a different political culture and the domestic response to the issue is not as nuanced as in Georgia. In Moldova, the people are not as passionate about the issue as in the South Caucasus because the interethnic aspect is much stronger in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia.

The next question asked about the reaction of international organizations to Dr. Ó Beacháin's work. Dr. Ó Beacháin stated that international organizations do not recognize these elections and hence, did not give any formal reaction to it.

The following question was also about international organizations and asked whether they might help strengthen the electoral procedures and whether the international community may help with conflict resolution in de facto states. Dr. Ó Beacháin said such organizations would not necessarily strengthen the electoral process. International organizations are not what makes these elections function. Instead, it is the electoral demand for better domestic governance that supports the functioning of elections. The electoral process is also a simple enough procedure for the local authorities to execute themselves. Dr. Markedonov added that the reason these elections take place is because a functioning electoral process is a better choice for the de facto states' populations than a government composed of military field commanders. Regarding conflict resolution, the term is defined differently by each state. From Georgia's perspective, for example, conflict resolution means the restoration of its territorial integrity by reintegrating Abkhazia and South Ossetia. From the point of view of international community, stability and predictability of these territories, under whatever authority, is the most important factor. The conflict resolution itself will depend on the willingness of sides to make compromises.

The next questioner asked why Dr. Ó Beacháin did not include Georgian refugees, who fled Abkhazia due to ethnic cleansing, in his research methodology. An additional question was, given the difficulty of return and electoral participation for these refugees, whether it is possible to speak of a functioning Abkhazian democracy. Since the political governance is restricted to the ethnic Abkhaz, does Abkhazia really have a democracy? Dr. Ó Beacháin answered that his work was not normative but descriptive of the situation on the ground; not what should have been the process from the point of view of the refugees, but what the existing election process was. The study also did emphasize that the political governance in Abkhazia is limited to the ethnic Abkhaz.

The following questioner asked Dr. Ó Beacháin to compare conflict resolution processes between Northern Ireland and the de facto states. Dr. Ó Beacháin stated that, unlike in the de facto states in the South Caucasus, the population of Northern Ireland is not ethnically diverse and is integrated. Thus, the reconciliation had to work through a democratic process. The ethnic divisions in the South Caucasus are much stronger which prevents successful conflict resolution. Overall, Dr. Ó Beacháin is pessimistic about reconciliation prospects in these de facto states, with the exception of Transnistria, as the conflict there is less ethnically-oriented.

The discussion closed with a question about democratic checks and balances other than elections in these de facto states. Dr. Ó Beacháin said that such checks and balances are not very strong. For instance, Abkhazia's President Ankvab prohibited a Belgian professor from lecturing in Abkhazia, demonstrating the authoritarian control the President holds.