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## Chapter 10

# Viability as a Strategy of Secession: Enshrining *De Facto* Statehood in Abkhazia and Somaliland

Giulia Prezl Oltramonti

### INTRODUCTION

Even a *de facto* state has to keep the lights on and sustain its institutions, albeit on the cheap. This calls for some sort of economic viability, whether on the shoulders of patrons or of diasporas or on the revenues taken in through various forms of income-generating activities. Some *de facto* states might choose to keep their budget to the minimum, other might engage in some forms of positive sovereignty – either by building roads or by paying pensions.

In either case, a viability beyond the institutional one must be ensured in order to support the institutional viability that is the flagship of *de facto* state's claims for statehood. If a state cannot develop a certain level of viability, it is unlikely that it would succeed in its process of state-making, hence undermining the secessionists' strategy for enshrining their secession.

Can secessionist movements (having first managed to achieve territorial dominion over given areas and then gradually established themselves as *de facto* states) do that, namely keep the lights on in the territories that they control – or strive to control? Can they ensure the viability of the new state that they aim to create? They are invariably adamant that they can; home states usually argue that they cannot.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the latter often invest substantial resources in curtailing the viability of secessionist territories as self-standing entities.

Secessionist actors have to hold on tight to the case that their coveted state is viable, as a partial justification of their aspiration for statehood. Hence, the search for viability is part of the strategies that secessionist movements and entities employ when seeking *de facto* and *de jure* statehood, legitimacy, and recognition by the international community (albeit not necessarily conjunctly). At the same time, numerous secessionist movements, having



unilaterally established territorial independence from their home state, need to establish viability to secure the *de facto* secession and create *de facto* statehood.<sup>2</sup>

Viability is used as a strategy of secession both in the mid-term and in the long-term, as a tool to achieve, respectively, *de facto* statehood and *de jure* statehood (or international recognition). There are different interlocutors at play, both internal and external, and they are baited with viability to provide legitimacy and support. The chapter contributes to this volume – and the wider literature – with a comparative and cross-regional study of the strategies of secession. It looks at two geographically and historically removed cases of *de facto* states, namely Abkhazia and Somaliland. In these two cases, *de facto* independence has been established and secessionist entities are confronted with the issue of securing and managing it. This case selection avoids the often-trodden approach of comparing post-Soviet *de facto* states to one another and treating *de facto* statehood as an exclusively Eurasian strategy of secession. Such approach, while informative regarding Eurasian cases, does not tell us whether the observation carried out transcend geographical borders or whether they are specific to the former Soviet Union. Looking at Abkhazia and Somaliland in unison tells as more about the strategies of secession of *de facto* states in general, if less about the post-Soviet region as a whole.

The chapter begins by differentiating between short-, mid-, and long-term strategies of secession and by explaining why viability is most relevant for the two latter ones. It shortly sketches out how Abkhazia and Somaliland ensured viability since their unilateral declarations of independence (UDIs) and then tackles how viability is used as a mid-term strategy (to secure *de facto* statehood) and, less successfully, as a long-term strategy (to secure *de jure* statehood). Finally, it underlines the links between viability and the search for legitimacy, whether internal or external.

### SHORT-, MID-, AND LONG-TERM STRATEGIES OF SECESSION

By their very own definition, secessionist movements aim to create a new state on territory which previously pertained to a larger sovereign state (Griffiths and Muro 2019). The creation of a new state entails its recognition by the international community and its consecration of its membership in the club of states as one *inter pares*. To reach this goal, however, secessionist movements develop a range of short-, mid-, and long-term strategies that are meant to further their position in relation to their goals. This chapter is largely concerned with mid- and long-term strategies, as well as with uncoupling the two.

As pointed out in the introductory chapter of this volume, secessionist movements have two main avenues to gain international recognition as states: either through the acceptance of their home state or through the support of the international community. Movements that unilaterally declare independence and that achieve some level of territorial independence through violent means are very unlikely to be successful in their quest for support from the home state. Consequently, their main *long-term strategy* is to circumvent the home state and appeal to the international community on a number of grounds. This is notwithstanding the fact that, as long as the home state opposes independence, the international community would be wary to infringe upon the territorial integrity of one of its existing members.

However, while striving for inclusion in the international community and addressing its members as part of its long-term strategy to gain it, secessionist movements have additional short- and mid-term avenues for action. For the sake of clarity, it is useful to reiterate what the *short-term strategies* are, although viability does not play a role there. For *de facto* states, which are the result of UDIs, these are the strategies that allow them to territorially break away from home states. While this is often achieved through violent means, it is not exclusively so, as shown by the cases of Somaliland and, to a lesser extent, Transnistria.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of UDIs, after establishing (including through violent means) the existence of a self-standing entity, secessionist actors have to focus on their *mid-term strategies*, ensuring the existence of a *de facto* state, which might not be recognized as such, but which will be territorially independent from the home state. In other words, secessionist movements can unilaterally take control of a given territory (whether the whole or part of the territory concerned by secessionist claims) and then resist reintegration into a wider national realm. This is what a number of secessionist movements have done in the past, some less successfully, others more so. While the former have been reabsorbed into their home states (Chechnya, Tamil Eelam), many of latter have formed *de facto* states, as a result of implementing their mid-term strategies of securing *de facto* statehood but failing to achieve their long-term goals (including Northern Cyprus, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh). But such *de facto* statehood, which is not consecrated by the international community, is a hazardous position to be in. First, *de facto* states are under constant threat of reabsorption into the home states from which they seceded. Second, they are hampered by their lack of recognition, which often prevents them from acting as members of the international community in a vast range of realms (diplomacy, trade, finance, etc.).

In order of priorities, therefore, the strategy of secessionist movements that opt for achieving independence through UDIs run from short-term (territorial independence) to mid-term (*de facto* statehood) and long-term (international

recognition). They first have to achieve control of a given territory and establish their *de facto* independence from the home country, then to ensure their *de facto* statehood throughout time, and finally achieve recognition in order to become full-fledged states, which in turn then will guarantee international protection. In parallel, secessionist movements strive to become authorities of *de facto* states (mid-term strategy), and eventually of internationally recognized states (long-term strategy). Viability is a factor that plays a role in the two latter ones. The following section looks at how viability is achieved in the two cases of Abkhazia and Somaliland, in order to illustrate the spectrum of factors that contribute to it.

### HOW DO *DE FACTO* STATES ENSURE VIABILITY? BY LIMITING ISOLATION

For *de facto* authorities, viability is closely linked to breaking away from the isolation imposed by a lack of international recognition; secessionist entities need to become facilitators of relations with the outside (whether political or commercial) that would ensure a survival of the secessionist entities in a globalized world.

Abkhazia is a point in case. Abkhazia's history in its post-*de facto* independence era can be divided into three periods: isolation broadly characterized the 1993–1999 period; the 2000s witnessed a progressive easing of sanctions and opening of the *de facto* border with Russia; and after 2008, Russia's presence in Abkhazia became more open and dominant. The viability of the Abkhaz *de facto* state is to a large extent correlated.

In the 1990s, the Abkhaz *de facto* state, while broadly existent, had very limited viability. This was due to a combination of isolation, war damages, and botched post-Soviet transition. Sanctions banning trade, financial, transportation, communications, and other ties with Abkhazia at the state level were imposed on Abkhazia in January 1996 by the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States. In relations to the war in the north Caucasus, in December 1994, Russia closed its border to all men between the ages of sixteen and sixty (Le Huérou et al. 2014; Zverev 1996). In addition, Soviet passports gradually expired, leaving the residents of Abkhazia with no documents to travel. This period is widely seen in Abkhazia as the time of the 'Georgian embargo', irrespective of whether travel limitations on people were imposed by Russia.

People survived with no support from the state, and the secessionist authorities drew legitimacy from their military victory but not by providing support to its population, aside from guaranteeing security from Georgia. The very limited viability that existed rested largely on coping and depletive strategies.

Some of the coping strategies that were adopted in Abkhazia broadly resemble those that could be observed in the rest of Georgia – and in most of the former Soviet Union – in the early 1990s: return to subsistence agriculture, depletive strategies, and migration. In Abkhazia, however, isolation and depopulation shaped those coping strategies in a unique way (Oltromonti 2017).

To fill up their coffers with a minimum of liquidity, the secessionist entities in Abkhazia exported scrap metal, its main export in the early 1990s (interview Bardon 2012). The *de facto* government relied on the income of the sale of dismantled factories and facilities, being unable to raise revenues through taxation (as productive activities had collapsed) or customs, due to its lack of control of its *de facto* borders (interview Gagulia 2012).<sup>4</sup> With these revenues, basic food imports from Russia and Turkey were paid for – providing, inter alia, a daily loaf of bread to state employees (interview Gagulia 2012).

In parallel, shuttle trade was a crucial survival strategy throughout the period of isolation and later. For this small-scale trade to continue as it did, notwithstanding the sanctions, an extensive network of corruption developed along the Psou border and at the checkpoints between Abkhazia and Russia, benefiting middlemen and Russian customs guards. Private initiative kept Abkhazia afloat, but the *de facto* authorities were largely unable to regulate or support it. On the contrary, *de facto* authorities benefitted from informality often on a personal basis (Oltromonti 2017).

The trickle of informal trade between Abkhazia and its neighbours is what allowed for a minimum amount of viability. This shows that viability is dependent on connections with the wider world, whether formally or informally. At the same time, however, showing the connections that Abkhazia maintained with its neighbours does not take away from the impact that severe isolation had on the region. It crucially curtailed access to credit and to aid for postwar rehabilitation of infrastructure, affecting Abkhazia's transition to a market economy and its reliance on distorted economic practices. Isolation, in fact, limited viability to a minimum.



A The attempt to build greater viability into the Abkhaz *de facto* state started with the reinstatement of more stable and substantial links with the outer world (and Russia, in particular). Travel and trade restrictions were slowly eased starting in 1999 (Diasamidze 2003) and Russian passports became available in 2002.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, citizens of Abkhazia may not hold dual citizenship; an exception was made for Russian citizenship, which provided a connection to the outside world. Russian and Turkish investments in transport, tourist infrastructure, and natural resource development. This included investments in roads (International Crisis Group 2006), a road (Lynch 2006; Sepashvili 2004),<sup>6</sup> and tourist complexes on the coastline (Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010, 110). The opening of the border between Russia and Abkhazia in 2000

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entailed a jump in foreign trade of up to 90% in exports of natural resources and agricultural produce (Baratelia 2007).

While the partial easing of trade restrictions on the Russian side have meant that Abkhazia's viability has expanded, its overdependence on Russia, and still very limited access to the outer world aside from Russia, limits the scope of development and resilience that the Abkhaz's authorities can aim to (International Crisis Group 2008). This is why they are actively looking for other partners, although hindered in their search by the lack of recognition and the tensions between Russia, on one side, and Georgia and its backers, on the other, which Abkhazia is drawn into (interview Abkhaz *de facto* government officials 2015).

Since 2008, Abkhazia has been recognized by Russia and a handful of other countries.<sup>7</sup> While this would seem to entail a reduction of isolation, it is not so. Diplomatic isolation might have decreased but through the establishment of links with countries that are themselves either isolated or insignificant on the global stage. The outcome is that Abkhazia has been unable to establish links with the wider world (with the exception of Russia) and to diversify its relationships with international actors. At the same time, Russia has established a monopoly over Abkhazia's links to the outside and meticulously maintains its role of self-imposed intermediary. As a result, Russia is also functioning as an actor of isolation, a role that numerous patron states have adopted with the *de facto* states that they back (Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh; Turkey and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus), albeit to various extents and in conjunction with a support role.

It is worth noting that Somaliland's case lacks both a patron state and a decisive home state but that the issue of limiting isolation has still been key to the *de facto* state's survival in Somalia, as Somaliland's home state has been unable to isolate the *de facto* state, aside from producing declarations condemning Somaliland's secession. Somalia's collapse and its lack of capacity to control southern Somalia and, during extensive periods, even its capital means that it cannot act as a legitimate and/or effective actor of national unity. Somalia is unable to control Somaliland's terrestrial, maritime, or aerial borders. At the same time, it also never managed to build consensus around trade or mobility restrictions implemented by third parties, which would limit transit of people and goods to and from Somaliland. Hargeisa's airport is fully functioning and connects Somaliland with regional centres and several hubs in the Arabian Peninsula. Also, Somaliland's port is one of its key infrastructures and is a matter of interest for Ethiopia, which could lessen its dependence of Djibouti as a transit country (Pegg and Walls 2018).

In fact, Somaliland is viable only because its home state is unable to limit its connections with the outside, on which it is extremely dependent. Remittances and exports of livestock account for almost the entirety of its gross



domestic product. Viability rests largely on the shoulders of the diaspora who support residents of Somaliland with significant remittances, at an estimated US\$500–900 million per year (World Bank 2016, 45). Remittances from the diaspora contributed to the creation of infrastructures such as schools and hospitals (Hansen 2004).<sup>8</sup>

The money transfer businesses that connect the diaspora to the Somalis living in Somaliland are the key element of transmission between in and out, notwithstanding the increasing hurdles to financial transfers towards Somalia that were developed since the 2000s as a result of the 9/11 attacks, increasing regulatory requirements in the United States and more stringent anti-money-laundering rules. While the money transfer businesses have been affected by increasing regulation at the source – in the countries of the remittances' origin and, in particular, in the United States – in Somaliland, the secessionist authorities have been largely unable to influence, control, or support them. After the leading transfer firm, Al-Barakat, was labelled as a terrorist entity after 9/11, a charge which was later dropped, it was replaced by a myriad of others, including the Dubai-based Dahabshiil, funded by a Somali originating from Somaliland. The funds transfer industry in Somaliland shows incredible resilience and only recently are secessionist authorities starting to play a regulatory role (Unknown Author 2018).

In addition to remittances, viability is provided by an additional connection with the outside, namely the export of livestock to the Arabian Peninsula (World Bank 2016, 12). This means that Somaliland's economy remains small and prone to setbacks due to the major impacts that droughts have on the agricultural sector, which is the segment of the economy that employs the vast majority of the population.

Clearly, in the case of Somaliland, *de facto* state authorities did not contend with private actors but largely relied on them. It is a clear case of state-making where private actors played the predominant role, with the state providing one precious element in the region: security. This does not mean that the state had the monopoly of legitimate violence as clans and individuals retained weapons and criminal affairs were and are dealt with at a clan level. But the secessionist authorities had co-opted such structures and could, with their support, guarantee the control of its territory and a level of security in which investments could be carried out.

Such security partly obviated the secessionist deficiencies in being able to invest in infrastructure or establish official relations with their counterparts abroad. Security allowed Somaliland to remain connected to its wider diaspora and ensured that, with the material support of the diaspora, residents of Somaliland did not have to migrate *en masse* out of its borders to access external resources.

## MID-TERM STRATEGY: SECURING *DE FACTO* STATEHOOD

The first step of *de facto* states' secessions (securing territory) often occurs via violent means, but not necessarily. The Georgian-Abkhaz war (1992–1993) is a good point in case of the employment of violent means, and so are the wars in Nagorno-Karabakh, in Transnistria, and in Northern Cyprus, among other cases – although the level of violence employed varied sharply in terms of intensity and duration. In Somaliland's case, however, the establishment of a separate entity was partly a response to the violent process of state collapse taking place in Somalia and an attempt to curtail the violence spreading from the home state.

Also, this first step of acquiring territorial control may be drawn out in time and fuse into the secessionists' strategy to secure the perimeters of the territory that they control. In both Abkhazia and Somaliland, the first key step in the establishment of their *de facto* statehood (securing territory) was not complete until the second decade of *de facto* independence. In the 1990s, the Abkhaz government controlled the north and centre, but the Gali district, which straddles the ceasefire line with Georgia, remained a sort of Far West until 2008.

In Somaliland, the *de facto* government took the borders of the British Protectorate as its official borders. But this did not mean that it controlled the territory included in those borders in the early 1990s; in fact, the process of expanding its authority outwards from the central areas of Somaliland has been a very gradual one. It did not have the capacity in the early 1990s to extend its reach and could only claim control of its central and western territories after 1997 (Hoene 2015). Its eastern borderland has remained more problematic: Somaliland had to fight for its control with the neighbouring entity, Puntland, in the 2000s and with local militants since the mid-2000s. The process of extending Somaliland's actual control to its claimed colonial borders is still taking place. While Somaliland has certainly its area of control and the number of districts where it is unable to hold elections has gone down, parts of the eastern regions remain contested as seen in the summer 2018 fighting between Somaliland and Puntland (International Crisis Group 2018).

In addition to taking control over a given territory, secessionist actors need to maintain that control – without the protection of the international community – and manage the territory and the resident population or, in other words, establish *de facto* statehood. How do they do this? Partly by ensuring their viability or by keeping the lights on. Viability is a multidimensional concept better understood in terms of continuum. At one end, the lights are switched

off, and secessionist entities are unable to sustain secessionist claims. At the other end, the lights are on and secessionist entities operate as fully functioning states, regardless of their juridical status in the international arena. This is dependent on economic and financial factors, and as well as the management of infrastructure, energy, and other aspects of public policy that allow for the provision of a minimum level of service in a given territory or to a given population.

It is worth pointing out here that ensuring viability serves numerous pillars that support the larger mid-term strategy of securing *de facto* secession. On the one hand, viability serves survival and goes hand in hand with state-making processes; on the other hand, secessionist movements harness viability for internal legitimacy. This is in addition to the longer-term strategy of putting viability at the heart of their discourse about independence, recognition, and legitimacy on the international arena.

Secessionist actors' ultimate goal is to create a new state. However, the issue of statehood is dependent, in addition to international recognition, on governance, involving state capacity and institutionalization.<sup>9</sup> Secessionist actors in control of given territorial areas strive to develop both, with various results. Just as varied is how observers rate the results of these attempts.

For example, the field was quite evenly split in its pre-2008 evaluation of Abkhazia's strengths and weaknesses. If Pegg (1998), Kolossov and O'Loughlin (1998), and King (2001) underlined its robustness, Lynch (2002), Fairbanks (2002) and Kolstø (2006) argued that Abkhazia was deficient, if not in their institutional structure, then definitely in their governmental capacity. However, conflicting assessments on the strength of *de facto* states concern not only Abkhazia and the other cases in the Caucasus but also Somaliland and Transnistria (Kolstø 2006).

This is due to a few elements. First, the development of the institutional capacity of a *de facto* state should be examined in its regional context. In the cases of Abkhazia and Somaliland, for example, this means taking into consideration the institutional collapse that affected the former Soviet Union and Somalia, respectively. Second, institutional capacity varies throughout time and, in Abkhazia's and Somaliland's cases, it has varied considerably throughout the 1990s and 2000s. But conflicting assessments are also due to the predicament of establishing what states' weaknesses and strengths are, spanning from the definition of a weak state as one that 'meets minimum Weberian definitions of institutions of rule and is able to carry out some basic functions but is far from performing according to domestic and international expectations of a "normal" state"' (Young 2002, 446), while the strong ones are 'states that are capable of carrying out functions that they themselves claim and that they are reasonably expected by their populations to carry out' (Nodia 2002, 415).

Notwithstanding the difficulty that scholars encounter in computing the success and failures of secessionist movements in establishing their *de facto* states, secessionist movements are often busy in building institutions characteristic of independent states. While there is no scope here for detailing the various developments of the two cases examined in this chapter throughout a time span of twenty-five years, it can be asserted that Abkhazia and Somaliland have been undergoing – nonlinear and certainly not unidirectional – processes of state-making in the years since their declaration of secession.

However, it is useful here to qualify two different aspects of state-making, along the lines of Lonsdale's distinction between state-building and state formation. If the former refers to the conscious process to create a state apparatus, which Lonsdale saw in terms of an apparatus of control, state formation designates the unintended result of interactions of individuals and groups who struggle for the establishment of their own position in the process of state-making (Berman and Lonsdale 1992). The literature on informality shows that this coexistence of state institution and private actors is present even after the process of state-making is consolidated (Ledeneva 2018). A symbiosis between the two exists to the point that they can be seen as the two ends of a formality/ informality continuum.

This double-faced understanding of state-making carries a few implications. On the one hand, state-making is only partly the result of the policies designed and implemented by state actors, in line with goals of state-building; the result of processes of state-making must therefore be seen as a concomitance of institutional and non-institutional factors. On the other hand, the state-building strategies of state actors do not exist in a void and must contend with a series of other actors, interests, and processes. What is more, they do not only contend with private actors, but they also largely rely on them. I have previously shown how Abkhaz authorities relied, especially in the 1990s, on informal practices (Oltromonti 2017); even more widely known is the reliance of the *de facto* state of Somaliland on the diaspora and remittances. At the same time, informal practices have sometimes been institutionalized: Somaliland has also incorporated traditional clan elders into its modern state as the Guurti (or upper house of parliament). Whether this *modus operandi* is effective or not is up to debate;<sup>10</sup> in any case, it is worth pointing out its existence.

If there is a symbiosis between authorities and private actors in the process of state-making, there must be benefits for both sides to nurture this interdependence. Secessionist authorities – either openly or tacitly – rely on private actors and on the informal sector for a range of purposes; at the same time, however, they must also provide support to their counterpart. They can do so by providing environments that are supportive enough of their counterpart

that their counterpart feels compelled to remain in this relationship – and not actively undermine the state.

In other words, secessionist authorities need to create and nurture stakeholders of independence. They can do that by showing that the project of independence is a viable one and that such stakeholders are better off by opting in than by calling themselves out.

This concerns also the residents of *de facto* states – secessionist actors need to turn a sizeable portion of them into stakeholders of secession. Patriotism and nationalism are the tools of choice; however, economic opportunities also factor in. In fact, secessionist movements sometimes spring up and gain momentum in regions that are more prosperous – or have more generous social security systems – than the rest of the home state. This was the case of Abkhazia in the late Soviet period but has also been the case in places where secessionism has led to less violent outcomes (e.g., Catalonia).

Secessionist authorities argue that residents are better off in a newly independent state than as part of a larger polity. To back this claim they need, if not in the short-term than definitely in the mid-term, to turn into service providers. In order to do so, however, they must develop an adequate level of state capacity that would sustain the provision of all sorts of services. In the process of establishing the new state – whether *de facto* or *de jure* – secessionist entities try to expand their positive sovereignty, that is, their capacity to support their residents, in tandem with their coercive power.<sup>11</sup> This is especially true in situations, such as those faced by *de facto* states, where their statehood is unrecognized and where authorities lack the legitimacy of international recognition.

In the mid-term, then, viability is therefore harnessed for internal legitimacy in a process of state consolidation and in the production of stakeholders' constituencies. But viability is also used to sustain a longer-term strategy of secession, namely the search for independence, recognition, and legitimacy on the international arena.

### LONG-TERM STRATEGY: SECURING *DE JURE* STATEHOOD

Securing *de facto* statehood is not enough for secessionist entities, as lack of recognition threatens both their security and their ability to develop internal viability. The long-term goal remains international recognition as states or, in other words, full membership of the international community. Granted, Abkhazia has received some degree of recognition after 2008, but this can in no way be seen as 'international' recognition. It was recognized by its patron state and a handful of its allies and so turning it into a pariah on the

international arena instead of making it a member of the international community. Whatever security guarantee Abkhazia draws from Russia, it does not come from recognition but by Russia's successful attempt to push its own security border South (Oltromonti 2016).

As mentioned earlier, as a long-term strategy, secessionist movements opt to engage with the international community and circumvent the home state, especially in cases of UDIs. To achieve their goal, they exploit a number of channels, including para-diplomacy and membership of bodies such as the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization or the Confederation of Independent Football Associations, as well as informal links provided by the diaspora. The arguments that they put forward in favour of their claim for international recognition are just as varied, some of which have received considerable attention in the literature on secessionist movements, such as remedial rights theories (Caspersen 2009).

One of the tactics for appealing to the international community is that of mobilizing the argument of democracy and showcasing democratic achievements, sometimes in the context of less democratic home states. The elites of Abkhazia and Somaliland strived to build institutions characteristic of independent democratic states, both as a strategy of state consolidation and as a tool for claiming international recognition. Repeatedly staged elections in Abkhazia led to a change of leadership in 2004. While no external monitors were present, the loss by the incumbents shows that the electoral results were far from predetermined. In Somaliland, the institutional makeup of the *de facto* state was formed in 1993, with the establishment of a two-chambers parliament, as well as distinct executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government. The first local, presidential, and parliamentary elections took place in 2002, 2003, and 2005, respectively, and were deemed free by international observers (Terlinden and Ibrahim 2008).

As an argument in favour of recognition, viability is less prominent but nonetheless present. This argument can be traced back to the decolonization period, when sovereignty in international relation was largely attributed on the basis of what was then considered as viability and stability – largely in line with colonial institutions. This is one of the reasons why the colonial borders and administrations were maintained and supported in their postcolonial transitions (Barkin and Cronin 1994, 112). Seen from today's perspective, it might appear that, post-1945, the international society forsook viability as a criterion for statehood. According to Jackson (1990), to be a state today you need only have been a former colony yesterday. It is worth noting, however, that a former colony yesterday was perceived, on the international arena, as a bedrock of the international order – and hence the only guarantee of stability and the only envisaged territorial expression of viability. It is precisely as a consequence of decolonization that a shift from empirical to juridical

statehood occurred. While the results of this shift clearly surfaced during the processes that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, *de facto* states are still playing yesterday's game (empirical statehood) in violation of today's rules (juridical statehood).

As statehood is largely understood in its normative dimension (a population; a territory; a government; and relations with other states), sovereignty follows suit, entailing the need to assess the ability of the state to control or develop those attributes. In fact, when the link between viability and institutional makeup has been made, it has entered the discourse on sovereignty (Hobsbawm 1990, 31–32). Viability is associated with sovereignty in function of a state being able to act as an enforcer – which is able to control its territory, its population, and protect its borders: 'State sovereignty emphasizes the integrity of borders based on historical possession, national frontiers, and viability. If we follow this logic, the viability of a state is based on the ability of established institutions to exercise authority over the population. This control is best assured by stable, effective states with strong institutions rather than by newly defined nations that may lack administrative competence and social stability' (Barkin and Cronin 1994, 112).

It is important to note that many cases of secession took place in the framework of declining stability and viability of the home states. When looking at Abkhazia and Somaliland, for example, it is worth keeping in mind the regional contexts of institutional collapse after the end of the Soviet Union and Somalia, respectively. The end of the Soviet Union engendered a process of institutional collapse, which was observable to various degrees throughout the newly independent states. Institutions in charge of maintaining internal and defence securities had to be reorganized around a new centre and that would no longer be Moscow. This was a lengthy process and, in the meanwhile, levels of violence rose exponentially. It could hardly be argued that states such as Georgia had the monopoly over organized violence. For most of the 1990s, Georgia could also not claim to be in control of its territory, even leaving aside the separatist territories. The process of consolidation of institutional control over its borders and territory is a process that took more than a decade, starting from less than zero in the early 1990s, when Russian troops manned the border with Turkey.<sup>12</sup> This was the case not only for the provision of security but also of services.

Similarly, the emergence of the *de facto* state of Somaliland is linked to Somalia's demise. Not only a total process of state collapse took place with the end of Siad Barre's regime, but this collapse turned out to be extended in time. Notwithstanding the intervention of foreign troops on Somali's territory to stabilize the situation and support of the international community to various kinds of transitional governments, especially since 2000, the Somali National Government still controls limited areas of some urban centres, in

addition to Mogadishu, and is threatened by local strongmen and Islamists (International Crisis Group 2014).

As shown above, secessionist authorities target various audiences with the concept of viability, which represent different strategies that *de facto* authorities develop to enshrine secession. In fact, viability can be harnessed to produce both internal and external legitimacies, which, in turn, can support *de facto* states' mid- and long-term strategies.

### VIABILITY AS A SOURCE OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL LEGITIMACIES

Viability is harnessed by secessionist movements as a source of legitimacy, in addition to keeping the lights on, and as such it plays, once again, into both mid- and long-term strategies. The audiences to which viability is presented as a justification for secession – and for the secessionist movements to be in charge of guaranteeing session – differ, as legitimacy can be sought after both internally and externally. The two cases of Abkhazia and Somaliland exemplify this dynamic clearly: in the former, internal support is gathered through viability, in the latter viability is used as an argument for external recognition.

In Abkhazia, isolation imposed from the outside was a key factor in limiting its viability; but there was also an endogenous factor that severely limited its ability to keep the lights on. This is *de facto* authorities' management of transition and their role, in the 1990s, as actors – or obstacles – to the economic development of Abkhazia.

Abkhaz *de facto* authorities had very little tradition of state management before 1991 and were not qualified for devising and implementing the necessary reforms, for transitioning away from a centrally planned Soviet economy. Few programmes aimed at kick-starting privatization and supporting the development of businesses and were designed to maximize political returns, showing little concern for their economic impacts. Privatization of large businesses reinforced a system of clientele which centred on the two successive *de facto* presidents, while the Fund for Support of Enterprises operated as a dispenser of cash in return for political support and not as a tool for encouraging business.

A state rhetoric on trade sanctions masked an absolute stasis with regard to establishing the foundations of a new, and more viable, Abkhaz economy and this resulted in a decline of key industries, which came to terms with the change in market conditions for Abkhaz produce and services (tea and tobacco production, tourism). Across the former Soviet Union, governments struggled with the modalities of transition; in Abkhazia the issue of transition was mostly sidelined, while creating opportunities for a few strategically

positioned members of the elites. To sum up, two factors made Abkhazia in the 1990s largely unviable/or very limitedly viable: first, isolation, over which *de facto* authorities had little control and, second, lack of reform, which was swept under the carpet and left unacknowledged. This was possible thanks to the depletive strategies put in place by the residents and the legitimacy that the political elites drew from the war victory.

This sort of legitimacy started waning in the late 1990s. As early as 1996–1997 a switch occurred in how the residents of Abkhazia attributed legitimacy to the government – from drawing legitimacy from winning the war to seeing the government as a provider of governance, services, and security, both external and internal (interview Inal-Ipa 2012). The shift became apparent in 1999, when the first serious opposition movement, ‘Vozrojdenie’ (Rebirth), was registered and started questioning the government and advocating for services. Previously, as the post-ceasefire society was based on an idea of unity and on Ardzinba as a hero-like figure, it had been largely unacceptable to express criticisms towards the government (interview Inal-Ipa 2012). However, the corruption and the mismanagement of resources, which had initially been accepted as a matter of fact, led to a change of power in 2004–2005.<sup>13</sup> The role of the government as a guarantor of viability for Abkhazia became a central issue of the political debate.

For Somaliland, viability is an argument presented to the international community in favour of recognition. To show its viability, Somaliland relies on two strategies: first, acquiring the symbols of a viable state and, second, contrasting its viability with Somalia’s lack of it.

Numerous developments stand to indicate an acquired viability: the founding of Radio Hargeysa as early as 1991, as well as newspapers, and the development of school curricula. A national currency is established in 1994; monetary policy, developed in view of stabilizing the Shilling in its exchange rate to the US dollar is implemented and as of late (2018) with the intent of phasing out the US dollar as a functional currency in the local economy. The airport and a number of roads are functional, and the vast majority of Somaliland is secure. This is leaving aside the gradual institutionalization of political power and the electoral cycles mentioned in the first part of the chapter.

At the same time, Somaliland has underlined its own viability as a state as opposed to its home state. It eschewed associations with terrorism and piracy, linked to the state failure of Somalia, and promoted itself as a heaven of stability in the region. In this light, it has cooperated with international efforts to repatriate up to 200,000 refugees from Ethiopia and Djibouti in 2006, as much of Somalia was controlled by hard-line Islamists, and accepts repatriation from EU member states of asylum seekers (International Crisis Group 2006).

Viability is an argument in the quest for recognition, because, to a large extent, that is what recognized states have. A viable state can legitimately

claim recognition from the international community and support from its own population. As discussed earlier in the chapter, this was true during the decolonization period, when sovereignty in international relation was largely attributed on the basis of viability and stability (or, at least, the viability and stability embodied by colonial institutions), and secessionist movements hope that it will eventually be true also for them. According to their strategy, if the authorities of a *de facto* state can keep the lights on, and in some cases also operate as services and welfare providers, they would prove the legitimacy of their claim to recognition and secure *de jure* secession.

## CONCLUSION

Viability is clearly much more successful as a mid-term strategy of secession (establishment of *de facto* statehood) than a long-term one (international recognition). In fact, it is so successful as the former, that it has sustained the existence of Abkhazia and Somaliland (together with an array of other factors, including the weakness of the home state and external support, whether from a patron or from the diaspora) as distinct territorial entities from their home states for more than twenty-five years despite the lack of recognition and the security that such recognition would have provided them.

This chapter has not delved into the intentionality of the search for viability as such and, in function of the finalities outlined earlier, and this aspect remains open to future research. However, it is worth noting that, in both cases analysed in this chapter, the strategies to shore up the gains of the initial short-term strategies (territorial independence) consisted in managing such territories through *de facto* state-like entities and to establish a viability of such entities – whether relying more on state intervention, such as in Abkhazia, or depending extensively on the process of state formation and its actors, such as in Somaliland. In both cases, *de facto* authorities kept the lights on, at least at a relatively tolerant level for most residents. It seems safe, therefore, to argue that this was indeed intentional, as it granted support towards the perpetuation of the secessionist project and legitimacy towards those steering such project forward.

## NOTES

1. ‘Home state’ is the terminology used in the Introduction chapter of this volume to designate the states from which secessionist movements aimed to break away; alternatively, the appellation ‘parent state’ is also used in the literature.

2. The appellation ‘de facto state’ is, therefore, understood as a state-like entity that lacks international recognition (Pegg 1998; Lynch 2004). There is no absolute

consensus on the characterization of these political entities. They are alternatively called ‘unrecognized quasi-states’ (Kolstø 2006; Baev 1998), ‘unrecognised states’ (King 2001), ‘pseudo-states’ (Kolossoff and O’Loughlin 1998), and ‘contested states’ (Geldenhuys 2009; Ker-Lindsay 2015). While at times the denominations are used interchangeably, for some authors they point towards important differences in the level of institutionalization that these regions have established; however, as Pegg (2017) points out, the terminological proliferation creates a fundamental weakness of this literature.

3. Broers (2013) highlights how comparatively low the level of violence was in Transnistria versus how much higher it was in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

4. Note that the official version, as of 2012, is that, ‘Budget revenues in the first post-war years derived from customs duties and taxes. By the late 90s, internal taxation began to exceed customs revenues’ (interview Stranichkin 2012).

5. As of 2002, granting Russian passports to Abkhaz residents became possible thanks to the passing of a new law on citizenship by the Russian State Duma (Russian Federation 2002) and so allowing Abkhaz residents to seek employment and claim pensions. As of 2003, a majority of retirees started receiving Russian pensions, estimates of annual disbursements to Abkhazia by the Pensions Fund of the Russian Federation being calculated at more than \$20 million per year (interview Baratelia 2012).

6. An additional segment of the line (between Sukhumi and Ochamchira) was restored from May to August 2008 by Russian engineering troops. The Georgian government claimed that the refurbishment had military purposes in the build-up to the 2008 war (Trier et al. 2010, 108)

7. After the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, Abkhazia’s (and South Ossetia’s) independences were recognized by the Russian Federation, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and, intermittently, Vanuatu and Tuvalu.

8. However, both of these major sources are viewed as inherently fragile. There are concerns that younger generations of expatriates will not be nearly as well connected to Somaliland, and hence their remittances will diminish; as for livestock, climate change and recurrent droughts, as well as Saudi bans on imports from Somaliland, threaten the sustainability of this industry.

9. While it cannot be developed here, for a matter of length, an argument has successfully been made that there is a strong relationship between state-building, security provision, and war. In parallel with keeping the lights on, a (contested) state also needs to find resources to fund its security arrangements; at the same time, its security needs lead to an expansion of state capacity and institution-building.

10. Walls and Kibble (2010) is a good example of the previously prevailing positive views on this, while Hoehne (2013) is perhaps the most forceful critique that neither part of this system (modern or traditional) is working well.

11. It is worth noting that many *de facto* states devote a disproportionate share of their very limited revenues to security/military forces, partly as a consequence of the lack of security guarantees from the international community and partly because of the very limited resources that they can count on to begin with. This share diminished when a patron state (such as Russia) guarantees a *de facto* state security through its own military apparatus.

12. Shevardnadze relied on bilateral agreements signed in 1992 for protecting the borders and providing border guards for the following two years (Serrano 2007)

13. For a review of the electoral system in Abkhazia and an assessment of its dynamism, see Ó Beacháin (2012).

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- Bardon, Antoine (president of the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie Française en Géorgie), November 2012, Tbilisi.
- Gagulia, Gennady (head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry; previously: former *de facto* prime minister of Abkhazia 1995–1997, and 2002–2003), November 2012, Sukhumi.
- Inal-Ipa, Arda (member of the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes), October 2012, Sukhumi.
- Stranichkin, Alexandr (*de facto* vice prime minister of Abkhazia), October 2012, Sukhumi.