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Profiling the Guardians of Separatism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

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Sons of the Soil or Servants of the Empire? Profiling the Guardians of Separatism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

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**ABSTRACT**

Who are the guardians of separatism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia? These de facto states can be seen as self-determination movements or as outgrowths of Russian imperialism. We arbitrate between these competing scripts using a dataset that profiles officials in charge of high politics decision-making inside Georgia’s separatist entities from 1992 through 2020 (N=608). We find that most are sons of the soil, though Abkhazia’s guardians are more multicultural than South Ossetia’s. Russian emissaries seized influential posts inside the self-declared republics after 2003 and, since then, sit in on Security Council meetings, thus rendering them incapable of autonomous decision-making.

**Introduction**

Despite their liminal position in international affairs, de facto states are at the center stage of tensions between the European Union and Russia over their shared neighborhood. Brussels approaches the region through the prism of its “Eastern partnership” but the Kremlin, still reeling from the collapse of the Soviet Union, treats it as its “near abroad.” Six separatist entities dot the landscape of this geopolitical shatter belt, from Azerbaijan (Nagorno Karabakh) and Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) to Moldova (Transnistria) and Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk). The authorities ensconced inside these contested territories possess some attributes of statehood but are dependent on support from a patron state—Russia—in order to fend off the control of their parent state. This gives rise to a puzzle that is important to resolve for scholars and decision-makers invested in a “Europe whole and free.”

Do de facto state officials represent their people’s desire for national self-determination or Russia’s desire to control recalcitrant neighbors? Separatist leaders toe the former line and highlight their success in building the trappings of independent state structures. But their structural dependence on Russia has garnered increasing attention in recent decades, not least in the wake of the Kremlin’s claims (August 31, 2008; March 18, 2014; February 21, 2022) to a sphere of “privileged interests” and promise to defend “compatriots” stranded in the Soviet successor states, whose borders are now being called into doubt through historical concoctions. We speak to this pressing debate on the in-dependence of the de facto states through a novel biographical dataset of the guardians of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s separatist projects.

These cases stand out as the first de facto states in the neighborhood to have been granted Russia’s recognition, formalized through the establishment of diplomatic relations back in 2008. Their external patron therefore ought to respect their independence. Although interdependencies are intrinsic to international affairs, no aspiring state can retreat from the practice of settling issues of high politics through autonomous decision-making. We therefore focus our investigation on the biographies of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s guardians. The profile of officials in charge of directing foreign affairs, upholding domestic order, or countering external threats tell us something important about the raison d’être behind these entities. We code officials as “sons of the soil” if they possess cultural, territorial, or ideological ties to the separatist project. If none of these linkages are detectable but the guardian has a record of past service in—or a career dependent on—the state structures of the Russian Federation, then we code him (all officials in the dataset are male) as a “servant of the empire.”

Our dataset contains 608 observations over the 1992–2020 time-span. We find that sons of the soil predominate, amounting to 94 percent in Abkhazia and 84 percent in South Ossetia. Yet, there are pronounced differences between the cases and significant changes over time. Abkhazia’s guardians are more diverse and involve not just “titular sons,” as in South Ossetia, but also “territorial sons” and “adopted sons.” Servants of the empire enter the inner circle of office-holders after 2003. Since then, Russian proxies run core institutions inside the de facto states and partake in their Security Council meetings, thus rendering the self-declared republics incapable of autonomous decision-making in matters of high politics. As a result, Abkhazia and South Ossetia no longer function as aspiring nation-states, but rather as Russian dependencies.
Prior research does not enable us to arbitrate between these competing scripts. Scholars have documented both sides of the coin, reconstructing the de facto states’ efforts at internal state-building as well as their external reliance on Russia (Gerrits and Bader 2016; King 2001; Kolstø 2020; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008; Popescu 2006). Yet, the debate over their in/dependence has proven difficult to settle. It is normal for “small and weak states” to bandwagon behind a “neighboring great power” (Walt 1985, 18), just as acts of pushback are common even in outright colonial relationships (Hechter 2013). Our investigation offers a more decisive diagnostic test. We focus not on the content of separatist policies but on the background of their decision-makers. In short, the biographies of essential de facto state officials ought to tie them to the soil, and not to the empire, if the claim to independence is real.

In what follows, we review earlier research on de facto states in Europe’s eastern rim and present the Abkhazia and South Ossetian cases. We then turn to the methods and materials behind the biographical dataset and unpack our results. Conclusions and implications ensue.

**De Facto States: Independent or Dependent?**

Separatist polities that function in practice, but lack international recognition, are known as “de facto states” (Pegg 1998). Several arose after the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav Federation fell apart in the 1990s. The right to self-determination then devolved to their constituent republics, rather than to minorities stranded inside of them, causing frustrated ethnic groups to rebel. Some succeeded (Kosovo) and others failed (Chechen Ichkeria and Serbian Krajinaj but still more persist in limbo (Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and since 2014 Donets and Luhansk). These de facto states purport to have a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states, which are the four criteria of statehood laid down in the Montevideo Convention.

As these de facto states have evolved so has research on them. Scholars first turned to the nationalist mobilization that led to their emergence (Cornell 2002; Kaufman 2001). The anarchic conditions inside the de facto states cast doubt over their survival throughout the 1990s (Fairbanks 1995; Walker 1998). But in a seminal article, Charles King (2001) countered that “the territorial separatists of the early 1990s have become the state-builders of the early 2000s.” His claim inspired research into the factors sustaining the de facto states (Kolstø 2006; Lynch 2002). Scholars began to scrutinize their institutions, strategies for gaining recognition, and success in mustering local support (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2011; Caspersen 2015; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008; O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2014). These studies illuminate different dimensions of the state-building process inside the self-declared republics.

Yet, questions about their external dependencies piled up. Nicu Popescu’s (2006) claim that the de facto states were “outsourcing” their independence precipitated the shift. Russia’s war on Georgia in 2008 made it seem as if the Kremlin had decided to implement the old “threat of dismemberment of those states that wish to leave [its] orbit” (Goltz 1993, 92). After all, elements from Russia abetted the separatists in the 1990s, and Russian troops later guarded the de facto states under the guise of peace-keeping—or “piece-keeping”—missions (Gordadze 2009, 34). The invasion of Ukraine in 2014 added Donets and Luhansk to the list of de facto states and fortified the image of the latter as Russian proxies, utilized as pressure points to subdue insubordinate neighbors (Souleimanov, Abrahamyan, and Aliyev 2018, 83).

Russia’s patronage over separatist entities in the region has been the focus of numerous studies. It accelerated in 2004 with the distribution of Russian passports to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Artman 2013). Despite turning their peoples into subjects of the federation, Russia recognized both de facto states as sovereign in 2008 and appointed officials from the Kremlin to oversee bilateral relations (Komakhia 2020). Georgia’s de facto states depend on these “curators” to cover their budgets, to train local cadres, and even to patrol their borders, thus giving Russia steep influence over Abkhazia and South Ossetia (German 2016; Gerrits and Bader 2016; DFRLab, February 8, 2018). Ambrosio and Lange (2016, 688) counter that neither “should be considered mere appendages of Russia” since both extracted “considerable concessions” from their patron in bilateral negotiations. Abkhazia is more prone to “bite the hand that feeds them,” Pál Kolstø (2020) claims, citing examples of pushback against the patron.

These debates are informative but inconclusive. Structural dependencies, however deep, and bandwagoning behavior, however fawning, are not sufficient for dismissing Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s independence. Small states often choose—of their own volition—to accommodate a regional hegemon, “especially if their powerful neighbor has demonstrated its ability to compel obedience,” as Russia did in the Second Chechen War (Walt 1985, 11). Neither are instances of pushback from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, however embarrassing for the patron, sufficient for dismissing their dependence. Colonial subjects often put up resistance to imperial rule, in particular if the latter is seen as alien or inept (Hechter 2013).

More conclusive evidence is needed to ascertain whether the de facto states represent local patriots or imperial pawns. To arbitrate between these interpretations, we devise a diagnostic test (Collier 2011). A *sine qua non* of sovereign statehood is the right to settle high politics through autonomous decision-making. Thus, if Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s guardians are rooted in the respective region, then we can confirm (H1) that the entities operate as aspiring nation-states and reject (H2) the reading of them as Russian pawns. However, if Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s guardians lack local ties and possess links to the Russian state, then we can reject (H1) the framing of them as self-determination movements and confirm (H2) that the de facto states operate as dependencies. Before presenting the biographical dataset constructed for the purpose of interrogating these scripts, let us introduce Georgia’s separatist challengers.

**Georgia’s Separatist Challengers**

Calls for independence in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia, the former an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the latter an Autonomous Oblast inside the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, arose in the late-1980s. At this time, Zviad
Gamsakhurdia and other dissidents were lobbying for Georgian “ownership” of the republic (Kaufman 2001, 85–127). Having suffered ill-treatment under Georgian rule before, Abkhazians and Ossetians experienced “fear of the future, lived through the past” (Lake and Rodcith 1996, 43). Both communities rallied behind demands for self-determination, thus turning regional parliaments into platforms for emerging separatist leaders (Cornell 2002). Yet, the first scuffles erupted between civilians.

In the spring of 1989, Georgians celebrating the independence of the pre-Soviet republic clashed with Ossetians in the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali. Later that summer, riots broke out in Abkhazia over the opening of a Georgian higher education branch in Sukhumi. The prevalence of hunting rifles and “disappearance” of small arms from local police units, supportive of their respective kin, added fuel to the fire. Countless irregular militias arose as “erstwhile neighbors claimed self-defense against each other” (Demetriou 2002a, 2002b, 872). War came to South Ossetia in 1991–1992 and descended upon Abkhazia in 1992–1993.

As a former Ossetian combatant recalls the mobilization process: “No one called us. We adopted this decision [to take up arms] ourselves” (Sanakoev 2008, 25). Apart from a unit of special purpose policemen, Ossetians raised several battle groups operating under different commanders, intent on rebuffing Georgian irregulars (HRW 1992).

In late-1991, violence flared as arms leaked from Soviet depots. Ossetians from North Ossetia, a republic inside the Russian Federation, brought armaments to their kinsmen across the border. Facing the prospect of a regionalized conflict and even a tacit threat of secession from North Ossetia itself, Russia badgered the parties into a ceasefire in June 1992 (Birch 1995; Zverev 1996).

Eduard Shevardnadze signed on Georgia’s behalf, as President Gamsakhurdia had been ousted in a coup d’etat the preceding winter. A Georgian-Ossetian-Russian peacekeeping force stabilized the conflict zone. In the 1990s, South Ossetia built certain fixtures of statehood and set about romanticizing the national past. However, separatist officials relied on “taxes” from contraband and lacked control over local Georgian-populated villages until the 2000s, when Russian subsidies mushroomed and its troops occupied residual terrain. South Ossetia’s aim is independence from Georgia but also to merge with North Ossetia inside Russia, either as part of a greater Ossetian republic or as a separate federal subject. Its bilateral agreements with Russia therefore foresee a process of far-reaching “integration” (Hoch 2020).

Abkhazia faced a different predicament since its titular nation is smaller, not larger, than its terrain. It therefore lobbied for support from peoples across the North Caucasus, organized into a confederation with its own armed wing (Lakoba 1998). “Abkhazia is strong enough to fight Georgia,” separatist leader Vladislav Ardzinba boasted in the summer of 1992 (Cornell 2002, 168). Soon afterward, Georgian militias overran Abkhazia. But backing from non-core groups enabled the Abkhaz to reverse their losses. The Confederation steered Circassian, Chechen, and even Cossack volunteers to the front (Zverev 1996; Celikpala 2002, 255). Local minorities also fought for the Abkhaz. Indeed, estimates hold that about half of all combatants on the separatists’ side were non-Abkhaz (Nodia 1997, 6; Demetriou 2002a, 25).

Georgian discord facilitated the separatist struggle. After the coup in Tbilisi, “Zviadists” backing the deposed president rose up in Gamsakhurdia’s native Samegrelo region, bordering Abkhazia. Ardzinba seized this moment to create a Separate Regiment of Internal Troops (Zverev 1996). It acquired arms from a Russian base in Gudauta and some combat support from Russian soldiers (Demetriou 2002a, 12–13; HRW 1995).

Under pressure, Shevardnadze agreed to a ceasefire, but disdained Georgian fighters defected to the Zviadists. As Samegrelo fell into their hands, the Abkhaz began an offensive. In the summer of 1993, with Georgian troops caught between Abkhaz separatists in the west and Zviadist rebels in the east, Shevardnadze had to “kneel” to the regional hegemon (Kozhokin 1996; Gordadze 2009, 35).

Abkhaz separatists seized all of Abkhazia except the Kodori Gorge; 200,000 Georgians fled. A ceasefire provided for the insertion of Russian peacekeepers under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Independence States (CIS), which Georgia entered in return for Russia’s “help” to restore order. Abkhazia spent the 1990s building the trappings of state structures and Ardzinba, himself a historian, oversaw the writing of the national past. But CIS sanctions thwarted economic recuperation and insurgents operated in Mingrelian-populated eastern Abkhazia. Not until the 2000s did Russia lift its sanctions and enable the separatists to take remaining terrain. Abkhazia’s aim is independence, from Georgia and Russia. Its bilateral agreements with Russia therefore define relations as a “strategic partnership” (de Waal 2019).

Methods and Materials

Our dataset emerged in three steps. We first identified official positions entailing responsibilities crucial to the survival of the de facto states. We then decided what features to profile among this upper echelon of separatist guardians, and last but not least located sources containing biographical information relevant for the coding. Let us describe the choices made.

We see officials in charge of overseeing foreign affairs, domestic order, and external threats as the guardians of the separatist projects. In both Abkhazia and South Ossetia this includes the president, prime minister, speaker of the parliament, foreign minister, interior minister, general prosecutor, defense minister, chief of the general staff, and directors of different power structures. In South Ossetia, the head of the presidential administration and the emergencies minister also emerge as salient figures. Despite some differences between the cases, and organizational changes over time, these officials are fixtures in the Security Council (Sovbez) meetings that convene under the umbrella of the presidential administration in Abkhazia (since 2000) and in South Ossetia (since 2002). We consider them, plus the respective secretary of the Security Council, as the “guardians of separatism” (https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14754273).
What data are pertinent to collect on these officials to understand the nature of their ties to the de facto state? A measure of simplification is required to uncover patterns in the web of biographical details. We opted for a coding scheme designed to give the de facto state the benefit of the doubt. It takes into account the fact that officials can commit to the national cause for different reasons, either one of which is sufficient for passing as a “son of the soil.”

Our first expectation is that separatist entities, born from struggles fought in the name of a core group, will entrust high politics decision-making to “titular sons.” We look at the names of office-holders to test this supposition. In Abkhazia, we code surnames ending in -ba, or sporting other traditional features, as titular sons (Chirikba 2015). This excludes surnames ending in -ia, -ua, or -ava, which are associated with Mingrelians, a sub-group of Georgians concentrated in eastern Abkhazia and western Georgia. In South Ossetia, we code surnames ending in -ti, or sporting other traditional features, as titular sons (Gagloiti 2007; Gutnov 2012). This includes Russified Ossetian surnames, since most South Ossetians favor unification with North Ossetia, a republic that is a constituent part of the Russian Federation.

When office-holders sport names uncharacteristic of the core group, we probe for other forms of roots. Our next expectation is that “territorial sons,” those born inside the domain of the de facto state, are motivated to safeguard it. If we cannot establish a geographical link, we search for ideological ties to the separatist project. Guardians are coded as “adopted sons” if we detect signs of devotion to the republic that predate their appointment to official posts. In our coding, titular sons, territorial sons, and adopted sons all count as “sons of the soil,” but the balance between them reflects the openness of the social contract in the de facto state.

If an official in charge of protecting the republic has none of these roots, then we look for a past service record in, or a prior career dependent on, the Russian state. When evidence thereof is found we label them “servants of the empire.” Our coding rules tilt the results in favor of the script casting the de facto states as local patriots (H1) and against the script framing them as Kremlin pawns (H2). We do not attribute weight to the possession of Russian passports or earlier service for the Soviet Union. Moreover, officials with careers in, or reliant on, the Russian state escape categorization as “servant of the empire” if they possess cultural, territorial, or ideological ties to the separatist cause. This label is reserved for those whose biographies lack local ties and contain clear signs of being beholden to the patron state.

We gathered the information required for the coding process (Figure 1) from open sources in English, Georgian, and Russian. We harvested data from the websites of de facto state institutions, information agencies, and newspapers covering the region. Presidential decrees helped us trace the timing of appointments. Most officials are esteemed personalities in their communities. We could hence reconstruct their life course through eulogies and interviews. Some guardians in the dataset had fallen out of favor after internal feuds but lived to tell their side of the tale in autobiographies. Still others kept a low profile, due to their lack of local roots, but are exposed in investigative or legal sources. In total, we coded 292 observations from Abkhazia and 316 observations from South Ossetia, covering 11 and 13 offices at the inner sanctum of the respective de facto state from their inception up until 2020.

Abkhazia’s Guardians

Who are Abkhazia’s guardians? 58 percent are “titular sons” and their dominance is clear from the outset. This is not surprising since the motivation of the Abkhaz to defend the state bearing their name ought to eclipse that of other groups. Yet, it is striking, considering census results from the region. The Abkhaz share of its population stood at 18 percent in 1989 and rose to 51 percent in 2011 while the Georgian share fell from 46 percent to 18 percent. Abkhazia’s Armenians and Russians experienced smaller changes, increasing from 15 percent to 17 percent and decreasing from 14 percent to 9 percent (Kolsto and Blakkisrud 2013, 2076–77). In spite of their slight demographic weight, titulars hold most posts that are central to high politics decision-making. Yet, backing from non-core groups has been essential throughout Abkhazia’s embattled existence from 1992 to 2020 (Figure 2).

States facing external threats often enlist support from neighboring peoples in order to overcome manpower shortages (Peled 1998). Abkhaz titulars fell back on this tactic, recruiting an astonishing range of non-core groups. "Adopted

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**Figure 1.** Coding rules for the biographical profiling of separatist guardians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:</td>
<td><strong>Titular son</strong> if name is characteristic of the core group; if not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:</td>
<td><strong>Territorial son</strong> if birth place is inside the de facto state; if not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:</td>
<td><strong>Adopted son</strong> if preceding devotion to the de facto state; if not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:</td>
<td><strong>Servant of the empire</strong> if prior career in or reliant on patron state</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sons” rushed to their rescue and took positions as second-in-command—under the titulars—in the first half of the 1990s, though “territorial sons” later overtook this role; 7 percent and 29 percent of office-holders belong to these respective categories. This is a low estimate of their contribution to the separatist project as some non-core groups backing the Abkhaz never entered the inner circle of decision-makers.

Among the reinforcements that arrived through the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, several ethnic cousins—but no Chechens or Cossacks—became guardians of the Abkhaz cause. The most prominent example is Sultan Sosnaliev, a Circassian of Kabardin origin (Abkhaz World, March 12, 2020). He chaired the confederation’s defense committee and became Abkhazia’s chief of the general staff (1992) and then defense minister (1993–1995; 2005–2006). Another case is Mukhamed Kilba of the kindred Abazin tribe (Apsadgil, October 2, 2019). He fought in crucial battles and later served as defense minister (2004) and secretary of the security council (2014–2019). Both men were born in the North Caucasus, but, because the Circassians and Abazins are related to the Abkhaz, their incorporation into the de facto state has been smooth. For instance, Kilba’s surname is indistinguishable from those of titular sons.

Chechens and Cossacks never climbed into the upper echelons of separatist officials. In the battle of Gagra, Chechen fighters under the command of Shamil Basaev, then Abkhazia’s deputy defense minister, helped clear the northwestern territories of Georgian forces. For his exploits, facilitated through Russian intelligence, Basaev earned a Hero of Abkhazia medal (Regnum, June 15, 2004; Derluguan 2005, 268; Civil Georgia, July 14, 2020).

Yet, as the conflict between Chechens and the Russian federal center escalated, the Abkhaz and their allied ethnic cousins began looking to the region’s Cossacks for support. Some partook in the battle of Sukhumi (Novye Izvestiia, February 11, 2004). Unable to use the confederation in their own quest for independence, Chechens disengaged from it and from Abkhazia (Celikpala 2002, 297). In 1995, Basaev unleashed a terror campaign against Russian civilians, turning his contribution to the Abkhaz cause into a source of embarrassment for the de facto state.


Adopted sons are sometimes misread as Russian agents. Cornell, Popjanevski, and Nilsson (2008, 5) label Sosnaliev a “Russian general,” though he is Circassian, never served in Russia’s armed forces, and came to Abkhazia through the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus—an organization that made a claim to sovereign statehood and for some time challenged Russia’s rule over the region. International Crisis Group (ICG 2010, 5) refers to Voinskii as a “transplanted Russian,” despite his life-long ties to Abkhazia. Some of the adopted sons, including Sosnaliev, received combat training or

![Figure 2. Evolving profile of separatist guardians in Abkhazia (N = 292).](image-url)
experience through the armed forces of the USSR. But this alone cannot make them “Russian”; former Soviet servicemen also became accepted as Georgian officials (Gogitidze and Bezhitashvili 2015).

Another sort of non-core support came from Abkhazia’s territorial sons. Six months into the war, the region’s Armenians created the Bagramian Battalion. It expanded over time, from 450 to 1,000 soldiers, first under the command of Vagharshak Kosian and then under Sergei Matosian (Regnum, November 4, 2011; RA Gazette, February 15, 2012; October 12, 2012). As the war concluded, a quarter of the rank-and-file soldiers in the Abkhaz armed forces were Armenians (Ishkhanyan 2004). Their contribution to the republic’s founding is publicly celebrated and both commanders are accepted as heroes (RA President 2018a). Matosian became deputy interior minister (2000–2004) and deputy speaker of parliament (2010–2012), a post Kosian inherited (2012–2017). However, neither of them—nor other Armenians—made it into the upper echelons of separatist guardians, despite their record of service and sacrifice. This lack of “vertical integration” is conspicuous and lends credence to claims that Abkhazia’s Armenians are consigned to subsular roles as a result of “ethnic stacking” (Rosliakov 2021).

In contrast, territorial sons of Turkic origin did join the inner circle of officials (Lakoba 2004; Abkhazinform, March 22, 2016). Konstantin Ozgan, born in Gudauta, served as foreign minister (1996) and Almasbe Kchach, born in Gudauta, led the presidential security detail (1993–1996) before climbing to the post of interior minister (1996–2002) and secretary of the security council (2003–2004). Their careers culminated at a time when Abkhazia, languishing under stern CIS sanctions, looked to its Turkish diaspora for help to escape international isolation.


The answer lies in the liminal position that enables Mingrelians to “pass” on both sides of the “ethnic” conflict. As residents of western Georgia and eastern Abkhazia, Mingrelians form part of the fabric in both societies. Georgia’s claim to Abkhazia is in part predicated on Mingrelians being Georgians. Their vernacular is related to Georgian, but unintelligible to Georgians, so their inclusion into Georgia is not seamless (Broers 2012). Mingrelians reliant on Russian as their standard language at times drifted into the separatist camp. Abkhaz often accept this fusion, seeing them as natives to the eastern borderlands, Samurzakano, and even as ethnic peers duped into adopting foreign surnames. Others still see them as Georgians, immigrants, and fifth columnists in the making. The region’s historical past is open to selective interpretation along lines that support both standpoints (Matsuzato 2011, 815–20).

Unable to “exorcise” the Georgian within, the Abkhaz entrust Mingrelians, passing as (Samurzakan) Abkhaz, with duties as separatist guardians. Aslan Bzhania is the clearest example (RA Gazette, August 1, 2014). Born in Ochamchire, he started his career in the local KGB and claims to have contributed to the Abkhaz war effort but left for Russia in 1994 and did not return until 2010, upon being appointed head of the state security service. He went into politics in 2014, and emerged as president in 2020. Even though the constitution (article 49) reserves this office for the ethnic Abkhaz, Bzhania’s surname did not present a hurdle. Mixed marriages and past assimilation processes, not least in the eastern districts once part of Samurzakano, has made Mingrelian surnames commonplace also among those of Abkhaz lineage. As a result, even officials bearing “corrupted” surnames can gain acceptance as first-class citizens, and represent the national cause (Kvarchelia 2014; Apsnyexpress, March 1, 2021).

Another kind of separatist guardian enters the scene in 2003. Unlike figures who possess cultural, territorial, or ideological ties to the de facto state, these have neither. Their biographies tell of past service in, or a career dependent on, the state structures of the Russian Federation. Six percent of office-holders in our dataset are categorized as “servants of the empire” on account of meeting these criteria. Their arrival begins with Anatoli Zaitsev, born in Mongolia (Krasnaya Zvezda, July 22, 2006; Komsomant, August 17, 2009; Regnum, September 30, 2013). He served his entire career in the Soviet and Russian armed forces, rising to the rank of lieutenant general, before resurfacing as Abkhazia’s deputy defense minister and chief of the general staff (2003–2009). Sergei Pustovalov, a Voronezh-born Russian armed forces veteran, joined him in 2004 (RA President 2020). He started out as an “assistant” to the Abkhaz defense minister and enters our dataset after taking over as director of Sukhumi defense college (2008–2009).

Since 2003, Russian minders control the Abkhaz armed forces through the chief of the general staff (Krasnaya Zvezda, January 27, 2010; RA Gazette, March 30, 2011; RA President 2015, 2018b; IA Res, August 2, 2018). Belarus-born Vladimir Vasilchenko, a major general in Russia’s armed forces, transferred from Siberia to take up this post (2011–2014). He passed the torch to Muscovite Anatoliy Khrulev (2015–2017), who came out of retirement after decades in Russia’s armed forces to serve as Abkhazia’s chief of the general staff. His reason for doing so can be gauged from statements predating the appointment: “if the motherland calls, I will go without hesitation. For the motherland, for Russia” (Regnum, April 27, 2012). In 2018, the post fell to Vasiliy Lunev, born in Chelyabinsk and—like his predecessors—a career officer in Russia’s armed forces. Lunev had served
in the Urals and the Middle East, and even as defense minister in South Ossetia (2008), before going on loan to Abkhazia as chief of the general staff.

Russian implants also serve further from the limelight. In 2010, when Bzhania took charge of the state security service, he appointed two Russian major generals, Vladimir Cherdantsev and Andrei Yuminov, as his deputies (Gazeta.ru, August 22, 2014). In 2020, after becoming president, Bzhania appointed Sergei Pustovalov as deputy prime minister. Our dataset omits such cases since it is limited to decision-makers at the pinnacle of de facto state.

South Ossetia’s Guardians

The profile of separatist officials in South Ossetia reveals a different starting point but a similar trend. Their sons of the soil are monocultural. Adopted sons were and territorial sons remain crucial to high politics decision-making in Abkhazia but both categories are irrelevant in South Ossetia. No less than 84 percent of its guardians are “titular sons” (Figure 3). This is a consequence of demographics. South Ossetia’s population shrank from 99,000 to 54,000 between 1989 and 2015, but the share of Ossetians rose from 66 percent to 90 percent while the share of Georgians fell from 29 percent to 7 percent (Birch 1995, 50; RSO Gazette, December 29, 2016). Another 460,000 co-ethnics reside across the border in Russia’s North Ossetia. Despite these titular manpower resources, servants of the empire flood the ranks of separatist guardians after 2003.

Although Ossetians participated in the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, and the latter engaged in saber-rattling in support of the former, their alliance never went further. In mid-1992, the confederation sent an Abkhaz volunteer battalion to Vladikavkaz, but North Ossetia’s leader, Akhsarbek Galazov, refused to let it cross over into South Ossetia. He instead promised to “secede from the Russian Federation” unless it sent troops to protect his co-ethnics (Nezavisimaia Gazeta, May 29, 1992). This act of brinkmanship jolted Russia into action, causing it to negotiate a ceasefire and dispatch peacekeepers to the region. Yet, no Ossetian delegate signed the interstate agreement. Uruzmag Dzhioev, South Ossetia’s then—foreign minister, complained that outside powers had “married us [Georgians and Ossetians] in our absence.” He concluded: “we are pinning our hopes on Russia” (Celikpala 2002, 231).

Rather than co-opting neighboring peoples to their cause, Ossetians monopolized all posts of significance to the separatist project. At its helm sat Torez Kulumbegov, chairman of the supreme council (1990; 1992), for whom Alan Chochiev—also born in Tskhinvali—substituted in 1991 (Kavkazki Uzel, November 10, 2003; IA Res, March 31, 2018). Oleg Teziev, a North Ossetian, guest-starred as prime minister (1991–1992) on account of his skills in procuring arms for the separatists (Expert, March 13, 2008; Osnova, August 8, 2019). Titular sons also filled the ranks of field commanders, the most notable being Valeri Khubulov, who became defense minister (1993–1995), Alan Dzhioev, Vadim Gazzaev, and Gri Kochiev also emerged as respected militia leaders, though in-fighting between them complicated the creation of a chain-of-command. All four hailed from Tskhinvali (Parastavae 2003; Sanakoev 2008, 25; IA Res, June 3, 2012; February 23, 2021; RSO Gazette, August 13, 2018; RSO, March 11, 2021).

Despite their status as founding fathers, most of these actors escape our dataset since South Ossetia’s constitutional structure did not take shape until 1996. Ludvig Chibirov then won reelection, though not as chairman of parliament (1993–1996) but as president (1996–2000). Born in Tskhinvali, he appointed other sons of the soil to high offices (Chibirov 2004). A territorial son, Nodar Zadishvili, led his presidential administration in 1996.13 Titular sons assumed all other positions of

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**Figure 3.** Evolving profile of separatist guardians in South Ossetia (N = 316).


Other “gastarbeiters” did not have Ossetian names and, in the absence of territorial or ideological bonds to the region, stand out as “servants of the empire.” 16 percent of officeholders meet these criteria and have a past service record in, or a career reliant on, Russia’s state structures. The armed forces first succumbed to their control (Kommersant, December 5, 2008; Illarionov 2009, 81–82). In 2004, Anatoli Barankevich, born in Kaliningrad, retired as colonel from Russia’s armed forces and left Stavropol to protect South Ossetia as defense minister (2004–2005) and secretary of the security council (2006–2007). A string of Russian emissaries—Vladimir Kravchenko (2004–2005); Andrei Laptev (2006); Sergei Sarmatov (2007–2008)—took the post of chief of the general staff. Data on them are scant, but Ossetian sources indicate that their titular predecessor, Ulfan Tedeev, retired in 2004 (IIFFMCG 2009, 103; RSO MoD 2018; 2021a). “Andrei Laptev,” who also served as defense minister (2006–2007), has since been exposed as an alias for Oleg Ivannikov, a Russian intelligence officer (Bellingcat 2018).15

The outsourcing of offices to Russian agents led some Ossetians to change sides. In 2006, parallel elections were held in South Ossetia, one in territories under separatist rule and one in settlements under Georgian rule. Eduard Kokoiti won reelection as president in the former but Dmitri Sanakoev claimed the same title on the basis of the latter. Sanakoev, defense minister from 1996 to 2000, set up an alternative government in Kursa and recruited Jamal Karkusov, former interior minister (2001–2002) and secretary of the security council (2003). Yet, further defections did not materialize. Kokoiti labeled both men “traitors to their homeland and traitors to the South Ossetian people” and managed to consolidate control over the separatist project before the war in August 2008 (Eurasianet, November 13, 2006; ICG 2007).

In order to prevent internal Ossetian challengers from rising and, thus, coup-proof his regime, Kokoiti began to allot the post of head of the KGB to external Russian candidates.16 It began with Anatolii Yarvoii (2005) who passed the torch to Boris Attoev (2006–2013),17 Viktor Shargaev (2014–2017), Mikhail Shabanov (2018), and Oleg Shiran (2019–2020). All of them are “Chekists,” recruited from the ranks of Russia’s FSB. Yarvoii, born in Astrakhan, retired from the FSB in Mordovia before being parachuted into South Ossetia (Gazeta Volga, December 11, 2009). Attoev came from the FSB in Kabardino-Balkaria (Illarionov 2009, 81). Shargaev viewed his appointment as an extension of past service in the Kremlin: “I took an oath of allegiance to the motherland […] South Ossetia was part of that land. Nothing has changed for me” (Interfax, December 21, 2015). After Shabanov’s brief tenure, Shiran became the fifth “Russian specialist” on the job (Alaniainform, August 20, 2019). Indeed, “behind its back, people call this structure, not the KGB but, a branch of the FSB,” Ostaev (2017) reports.

Servants of the empire retain control over South Ossetia’s armed forces (Krasnaia Zvezda, September 5, 2009; April 8, 2010; Kommersant, April 1, 2009; August 5, 2013; Civil Georgia, April 8, 2014). In 2008, Vasili Lunev, a Russian major general, left Perm to serve as defense minister in Tskhinvali, claiming he was “needed” there (ICJ 2009, 157). During the August war, he led Russian units into battle in South Ossetia. In 2009, Lunev returned to active service in Russia, passing the baton to Yurii Tanaev, a Russian lieutenant general, who—on South Ossetia’s behalf—signed the “bilateral” agreement establishing a Russian base in Tskhinvali. From 2010 through 2015, a decorated Hero of Russia, Valerii Yakhnovets, took charge as defense minister in South Ossetia. Although proposals to disband the region’s armed forces came to naught,18 after a titular son became defense minister in 2016, the soldiers that remain stand under surveillance from Viktor Fedorov, another Russian minder without ties to the region, who since 2016 has served as chief of the general staff (RSO MoD 2021b).

Some Russian delegates focused on protecting the Kremlin’s financial interests in Tskhinvali. Yurii Morozov did so as prime minister (2005–2007); Aleksandr Bolshakov as head of the presidential administration (2008); Vadim Brovtsev as prime minister (2009–2011). All had a background in Russia’s state-business nexus (Kommersant, November 6, 2008; November 13, 2008; December 5, 2008; March 3, 2009; August 6, 2009; September 1, 2011). Morozov left the oil sector in Bashkortostan to oversee the use of mushrooming Russian funds in South Ossetia. But, after the August war, Kokoiti fired him as he sought to control reconstruction aid slated for the region. Unwilling to let locals manage the 10 billion ruble tranche, the Kremlin first foisted Bolshakov, a United Russia “apparatichik” from Vladimir, onto Kokoiti’s administration and then parachuted Brovtsev, a construction mogul from Ozersk with ties to Russia’s Ministry for Regional Development, into the prime minister’s chair. Despite not being a citizen of the self-declared republic, Brovtsev served as acting president in 2011 (IA Res, May 22, 2012).

After the completion of the reconstruction program in 2011, these economic “gastarbeiters” left the region, resulting in a drop in the share of Russian minders among separatist guardians. We might underestimate their presence since there are cases of officials adopting fictitious Ossetian names “so as
not to give cause for indignation in Tbilisi” (O斯塔ev 2017). Upon being appointed to head the government protection service in the summer of 2007, Vladimir Umarov, a retired Russian colonel, presented himself as Vladimir Kotoev in order to “pass” as a titular son (IIFMC 2009, 104). He later shed this alias, explaining “it is useless, all of Tskhinvali already knows who I am and where I work” (Profile Magazine, November 5, 2007). Others might have pulled off the act and, therefore, evaded detection in our dataset.

Patterns across Cases and over Time

In both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, sons of the soil ran all de facto state institutions central to high politics decision-making throughout the first decade of the separatist projects. Thus, both operated as expected of aspiring nation-states. Despite this common denominator, the composition of the sons of the soil differs between the cases, since Abkhazia’s guardians are multicultural and South Ossetia’s guardians are monocultural in their background (Table 1).

In Abkhazia, manpower shortages in the face of looming conflict led titulars to enlist support from neighboring peoples. Adopted sons, whose commitment to the de facto state pre-dated its founding, took on crucial responsibilities throughout the 1990s. Some of them had childhood ties to the region. Others arrived through the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. Territorial sons also reinforced the Abkhaz. From 1992 through 2002, when decision-makers rooted in the region still called the shots, 16 percent and 26 percent of office-holders belonged to these categories, thus adding considerable human resources to the titular sons, who—at 58 percent—formed the nucleus of separatist guardians. We thus see evidence of the “Piedmont Principle” in action: the aspiring state pulls neighboring peoples—in particular those that are culturally close—into the national fold (Paci, Sambinis, and Wohlfarth 2020).

However, the uptake of non-core groups into the inner circle of separatist guardians is stratified. Despite their contribution to the Abkhaz war effort, Chechens and Armenians never ascended to commanding heights. Circassians and Mingrelians did. This pattern of “vertical integration” suggests that positions crucial for safeguarding the de facto state are entrusted to candidates seen as reliable on account of their group belonging (Peled 1998). Chechens fell out of favor and disengaged soon after the cessation of hostilities, since their pursuit of statehood back home resulted in an anti-Russian stance considered untenable for the Abkhaz.

The exclusion of Armenians is more puzzling. Their commitment to the separatist cause might still be in doubt among the Abkhaz. Yet, “especially after war,” minorities seeking equal opportunities often engage in “rhetorical coercion,” framing their demands as a fair reward for sacrifices made on the battlefield (Krebs 2006, 3). This republican argument does not resonate in Abkhazia. As Sergei Matosian, former commander of the Bagramian Battalion, admits: Abkhazia’s Armenians have two homelands, a “homeland of birth” and a “historical homeland,” but the Abkhaz have nothing apart from Abkhazia and are hence entitled to lead it (Berge 2011, 19). In the context of this primordial discourse, Mingrelians capable of passing as (Samurzakan) Abkhaz face fewer obstacles in accessing the corridors of de facto state power.

In South Ossetia, sons of the soil are a monocultural lot. Instead of enrolling neighboring peoples in their cause, Ossetians utilized co-ethnics from North Ossetia as a manpower reserve and engaged in brinkmanship to coerce Russia into intervening on their behalf. Titular sons took charge as field commanders and in other official capacities, seizing almost all positions of significance to the de facto state, from its inception in 1992 through 2002. However, these roots began to fade at the outset of the 2000s, as South Ossetia hitched its wagon to the Kremlin. “Gastarbeiters” entered the scene, consisting of officials dispatched from the Russian state. Some were co-ethnics from the north, capable of passing themselves off as titular sons, but others lacked cultural, territorial, or ideological ties to the region.

Their penetration of the de facto states began in 2003 and, since this critical juncture, 10 percent of office-holders in Abkhazia and 22 percent in South Ossetia stand out as Russian emissaries on account of their prior careers in—or reliance on—the patron state. Its envoys seized control over a similar subset of institutions in both separatist republics and, at times, even rotated between them, thus suggesting that their appointments are orchestrated from the Kremlin. This practice of foisting officials onto client states, to serve the interest of their patron state, reflects an established Soviet method of controlling former satellite countries (Tomasic 1950).

The insertion of Russian minds into institutions responsible for protecting the de facto states undercuts Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s claim to independence, but also Russia’s recognition of them as sovereign states. We dub those officials “servants of the empire” because their presence runs counter to the norms of self-determination and noninterference. In both entities, Russian emissaries sit on positions critical to the operation of the defense forces. Alien rule is more brazen, but perhaps also more welcome, in South Ossetia. Russian proxies run the region’s KGB as if it were a branch of the FSB, a custom that appears useful for insulating the institution from infighting among native elites. For some time, Russian proxies even usurped the reins of government in South Ossetia—a more controversial imposition designed to check the (mis)use of federal funds slated for the separatist authorities.

The most consistent destination for Russia’s minds in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is the post of defense minister or chief of the general staff. Oversight in other sectors tends to be

| Table 1. Share (%) of Different Categories of Separatist Guardians, by Case and Phase |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Titular sons                    | 58               | 57               | 99               | 78               |
| Territorial sons                | 26               | 30               | 1                | 0                |
| Adopted sons                    | 16               | 3                | 0                | 0                |
| Servants of the empire          | 0                | 10               | 0                | 22               |
| N                               | 94               | 198              | 92               | 224              |
more indirect, often enabling sons of the soil to take the lead, albeit under conditions of extreme structural dependence (Kolsto and Blakkisrud 2021). These appointment patterns indicate that the Kremlin’s interest—dating back to 2003—is to lock the de facto states inside its geopolitical orbit and thus also prevent Georgia from escaping it without dismemberment.

**Conclusions and Implications**

It is a paradox that Europe’s unrecognized neighbors—clamoring for independence—are subject to debate because of their dependencies. This article has revisited this puzzle using a novel dataset that profiles 608 separatist guardians in Abkhazia and South Ossetia from 1992 to 2020. We found that Georgia’s de facto states started out as aspiring nation-states. Throughout their first decade, offices critical for protecting these entities were held by actors possessing clear roots to the soil. In Abkhazia, most of them were titular sons with cultural ties to the state-bearing nation, territorial sons born in the republic, or adopted sons devoted to it for ideological reasons. In South Ossetia, almost all separatist guardians were titular sons. Nothing in the biographical dataset suggests that the de facto states lacked the power to define their own national interests.

After 2003, actors alien to the region and beholden to the Russian state took over offices crucial for guarding the separatist projects. Abkhazia and South Ossetia ceded control over institutions at the heart of the national cause and lost an attribute indispensable for aspiring states: the prerogative to settle matters of high politics through autonomous decision-making. Russian minders run the separatist armies and other power structures inside the de facto states, and therefore hold ex officio seats at Security Council meetings in both regions. This renders Abkhazia and South Ossetia incapable of defining their own national interests and adds decisive weight to the script framing them as Russian pawns. Small states dependent on a great power patron are expected to bandwagon, but the separatist entities cannot demonstrate that the choice to do so is theirs. Not unlike other Russian subjects in the North Caucasus, where confrontations over federal subsidies and assimilation policies are a recurring sight, both republics can “bite the hand that feeds them”—but not over high politics.

These findings provide a biographical prism into the social contract sustaining Georgia’s separatist entities and enable us to diagnose their evolving raison d’être. It is difficult to take Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s claim to independence, and the Kremlin’s recognition thereof, at face value as long as fundamental de facto state structures depend on Russian delegates for directions. At a time when the rule-based international order in Europe faces unprecedented challenges, in large part due to Russia’s descent into imperial nostalgia, a pressing task for future research is to profile separatist guardians in other unrecognized entities. We need to learn whether these represent indigenous creations that support—or colonial dependencies that subvert—international principles of self-determination and noninterference.

**Notes**

1. Nagorno Karabakh’s patron is Armenia, though Russian support is crucial to them both.
2. The State Security Service (SGB) and the Defense College (SVOKU) in Abkhazia. The State Security Committee (KGB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SBR) in South Ossetia.
3. Throughout the centuries, Abkhaz surnames have been adapted to Mingrelian form, and vice versa, so it is not a sign of ethnic origin.
4. His surname has a Mingrelian –ia suffix, although the root suggests titular heritage (Lakrba).
5. Voinskii received a Hero of Abkhazia medal for the sea landing at Tamishi.
6. Kosian obtained the Order of Leon and Matosian a Hero of Abkhazia medal.
7. In the 1860s, after Imperial Russia’s conquest of the northwestern Caucasus region, Circassians, Abazins, and large numbers of (Muslim) Abkhazians fled to the Ottoman Empire.
8. “Passing” refers to cases when members of one group are accepted as members of another.
9. According to Achugba (2010, 182–85), Abkhazians began adopting Mingrelian surnames to escape deportation to the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s. The process continued as Orthodox priests recorded parishioners’ surnames in Mingrelianized form.
10. For instance, Jinjolia rather than Ajinjial or Kishmaria rather than Kishmara.
12. This despite an apparent attempt, in 2010, to purge Russian minders from the top brass and restore control over the sector to sons of the soil (Eurasianet, May 4, 2010).
13. Zadishvili’s surname can be understood as a Georgianization of the Ossetian “Zadyiti,” often Russianized as “Zadiev” (Gagloiti 2007, 49).
14. Born Kokoev, Eduard changed his surname into Ossetic form, Kokotii, as a protest after having been told in Soviet-era Tbilisi to adopt Kokoshvili as his name (Hewitt 2013, 182).
16. Ossetians directing the KGB had a record of using the institution for private interests (Kommersant, July 10, 2006; Newsru, December 6, 2011).
17. For some time in 2006, Nikolai Dolgopolov held the post. Born in Altai, he left the FSB in Mari El to direct South Ossetia’s KGB.
18. One Ossetian commentator protested: “it has to remain […] so that the sovereignty of our country does not depend on geopolitical changes” (Alaniaiform, February 9, 2012).
19. If appointment decisions had been made on the basis of individual merits or domestic balancing, then we would have expected a greater representation of Armenians in our dataset.
20. Abkhazia’s Armenians tend to prefer integration into Russia over independence. Their inclusion in the ranks of separatist guardians might also complicate Abkhazia’s relationship to its Turkish diaspora.
21. The alternative explanation would be that each de facto state, in parallel, managed to recruit senior officials from Russia’s power structures. It defies belief.

**Data Deposition**

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