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Independence or Unification with a Patron State? Not Such' Dichotomous Ideas as One Would Think: Evidence from South Ossetia

Tomáš Hoch* 

Abstract:

Independence or unification with Russia? That is a question that is constantly present in the South Ossetian public space. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, two referendums have been held in South Ossetia on the issue of state sovereignty (in 1992 and 2006). Since 2015, many proclamations have been made by South Ossetian politicians about preparations for another referendum on the subject. In the case of South Ossetia, what one would think as dichotomous ideas – independence and unification with Russia – are in fact overlapping concepts. The aim of this paper is to contribute to a closer understanding of the puzzling current reality in South Ossetia in terms of the debate on unification versus independence. On the one hand, South Ossetia seeks independence, but on the other, it is constantly seeking to join Russia. The second goal of the paper is to identify the factors, which underlie the South Ossetian discourse supporting the idea of unification with the Russian Federation. As a result of the analysis, the author concludes that the issue of security and the idea of a divided nation play a crucial role in this discourse. These topics frequently appear in the statements of the South Ossetian political elite as the main arguments in favour of accession to Russia. In addition, there are several other important variables, which can explain this prevailing South Ossetian narrative: the lack of human and natural resources for a viable state, the fatigue of the South Ossetian population in the face of the incompetence of local elites, and their aspiration for Russian centralisation. Finally, because a fuzzy independence narrative has also been documented in other de facto states, the author seeks an answer to a more general question: Why does this overlap in the narrative of independence versus unification arise in de facto states?

Keywords: sovereignty, independence, de facto states, conflict transformation, South Ossetia

Introduction

Social science research focusing on the post-Soviet space has traditionally mentioned South Ossetia as an example of a de facto state.¹ Though various scholars give different definitions of de facto statehood,² one part of the definition that is usually present is the idea that a de facto state actively seeks broad international recognition of its sovereignty, yet receives such recognition either not at all or only to a very limited extent. However, in the case of South Ossetia,³ the question of an

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1 Following Pegg (1998), Kolstø (2006), Caspersen and Stansfield (2011), or Hoch, Kopeček and Baar (2017), the author of this paper considers de facto states to be regions that have a defined state territory, permanent population and their governments are in control of the entire territory they claim, or at least most of it. The state authorities perform state administration, have the capacity to enter into relations with other states, and they have been seeking independence for at least two years, while failing to gain international recognition of their independence (or they have been recognized by only a few countries).

2 However, as Pegg rightly points out, 'disagreements come only around the edges of the definition, while not disputing the basic elements of it ... and a fairly widespread consensus exists among scholars about the basic elements of how to define a de facto state' (Pegg, 2008, p. 1).

3 Since the 2017 referendum, the official name of the de facto state has been 'Republic of South Ossetia–State of Alania'. For the sake of brevity and clarity the author uses the term South Ossetia in this text. Because this de facto state is internationally recognized only by five UN member states (Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and Syria), government positions and other political functions should be preceded by the phrase 'de facto' (e.g. de facto President, de facto Prime Minister or de facto Parliament). However, in this text the author omits this phrase when referring to these positions and functions. This does not reflect the author's political preferences in any way; the purpose is merely to maximize the legibility and simplicity of the text.

active effort to seek international recognition is not so obvious. Compared to Abkhazia, the second breakaway region of Georgia, where the independence narrative has been deeply rooted in the public space since the war at the beginning of the 1990s (e.g. Jones, 2014; Hoch, 2018; or Smith, 2018), in South Ossetia the entire question of independence is much more complicated and has varied over time.

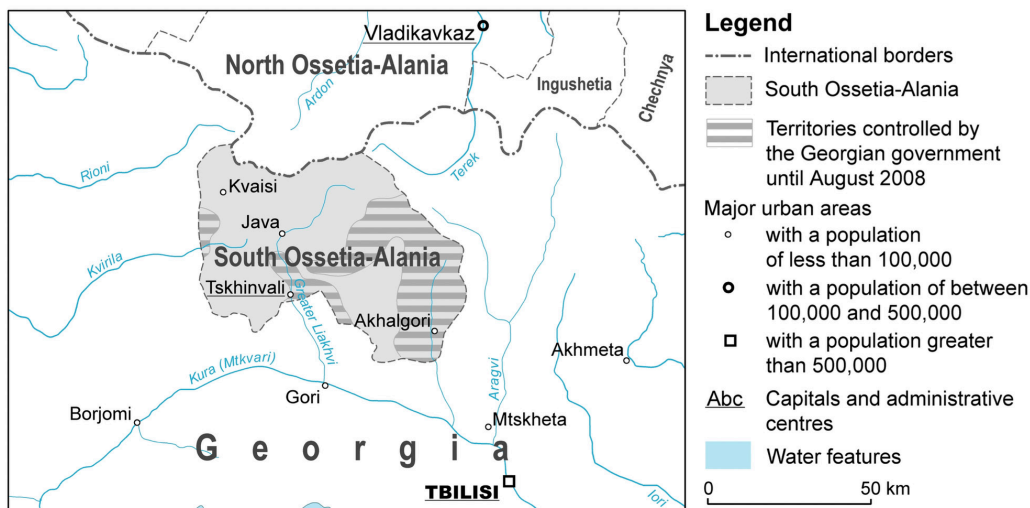


Figure 1: Map of South Ossetia

Source: Hoch and Kopeček (2020), p. 87

After the all-Union referendum on the preservation of the USSR as a renewed federation, held in March 1991, another two referendums on the question of state sovereignty were held in South Ossetia. The first referendum was held in 1992. Voters answered two questions: “Do you agree that South Ossetia should be an independent country?” and “Do you agree with the South Ossetian Parliament’s solution of 1 September 1991 on reunion with Russia?” The overwhelming majority of voters (more than 99%) answered both questions in the affirmative. The second referendum was held in 2006, when the majority of the population chose to remain independent. Voters were asked the question: “Should the Republic of South Ossetia retain its current status as an independent state, and be recognised by the international community?” (Lomsadze, 2015). At first sight, the results of the first referendum appear to be mutually incompatible with the results of the second referendum. State independence should, by its very nature, mean something qualitatively different than unification with Russia. However, as will be demonstrated later in this text, in the case of South Ossetia these apparently dichotomous ideas – independence and unification within Russia – in fact overlap.

In a rare independent survey of South Ossetian political opinions in 2010 carried out by John O’Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov and Gerard Toal, over 80% of respondents expressed the desire for union with the Russian Federation (O’loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal, 2014). The idea of unification with Russia has been present in South Ossetian historiography since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Skakov, 2011). As demonstrated by the results for the second question in the 1992 referendum, it has also been part of the local political agenda since that time. On 19 October 2015, the President of South Ossetia, Leonid Tibilov, announced that he was planning to conduct a referendum on South Ossetia’s accession to Russia (RES, 2015). Since late 2015, South Ossetian politicians have made many proclamations about preparations for another referendum on the subject. It is not only the questions in the referendums that have changed during the past three decades, but also the attitudes of local elites in South Ossetia. Their approaches have oscillated from sovereignty and independence, through joining the Russian Federation as an autonomous republic, to unification with North Ossetia-Alania and the creation of a joint republic that would be part of the Russian Federation.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the current puzzling reality in South Ossetia in terms of the debate on unification versus independence – on the one hand, South Ossetia seeks independence, but on the other, it is constantly seeking to join Russia. The second goal of the paper is to identify the factors underlying the prevailing South Ossetian discourse supporting the idea of unification with the Russian Federation.⁴

The article is based on the South Ossetian political elite's official statements on the issue of independence and unification with Russia. Data sources include the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of South Ossetia, South Ossetia's press agencies, and news articles from Eurasian news outlets. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part is intended as a brief overview of the research, focusing on the phenomenon of fluctuating independence narratives in *de facto* states. The second part describes the narrative of the so-called '*three genocides*'⁵ – a narrative which is constantly present in the South Ossetian public space, and which undermines the willingness of the South Ossetian population to share the same state with Georgians. The third part reviews current political preferences in South Ossetia regarding independence or accession to the Russian Federation. Based on these empirical findings from the South Ossetian case, the more general issue of a definition for *de facto* states and the conditions required for the fluctuating independence narratives are discussed in the conclusion.

Independence narratives in *de facto* states: overview of the research

The failure to find a solution to prolonged conflicts in *de facto* states represents a problem not only in the economic and political sphere, but also for social development and international security. It is therefore unsurprising that during the past quarter of a century, *de facto* statehood has been an important area of research among political scientists, geographers, experts in security studies, international relations, and area studies. One of the first authors who attempted to present a systematic theoretical account of the existence of *de facto* states in the international environment was Scott Pegg. His monograph 'International Society and the De facto State' (1998) structurally focused on issues related to the contested status of these entities. With a certain degree of generalisation, it could be said that researchers at the turn of the millennium mostly focused on case studies exploring the roots of separatist conflicts, the possibilities for conflict resolution and on the external relations of *de facto* states. The internal dynamics of development in unrecognised states has been somewhat neglected by researchers, and these issues only began to gain more attention around 2005–2008 (Caspersen, 2008a). To a large extent this shift in focus is due to the fact that *de facto* states are no longer considered as merely a passing phenomenon and that these entities are capable of existing for a relatively long period of time, despite their complete (or almost complete) lack of international recognition.⁶ The second reason for the growth of academic interest in the internal dynamics of development is the fact that access to these territories has

4 It is important to mention that the Georgian refugees from South Ossetia and the Georgian community who remained are not included in this analysis of domestic debates in South Ossetia. The main reason is that the Georgian community (whether currently outside the administrative border line or inside South Ossetia) has, after the war in 2008, no voice and real power to influence the local narrative in South Ossetia towards either independence or unification with Russia.

5 When discussing the South Ossetian narrative of the '*three genocides*', the author adds the qualifier so-called and writes the phrase in italics, because the designation of the events of 1920, 1991-1992 and 2008 as acts of genocide is not used by any international human rights organization, nor by any UN member state (with the exception of the Russian Federation, which used this designation to justify its military operation in 2008). In addition, Georgian officials have never described these events as genocides. However, in South Ossetia (as well as in North Ossetia) this notion of genocide is perceived as an undisputable reality, so it is necessary to mention this important aspect of the South Ossetian narrative.

6 Kolstø (2006) claims that the main reasons why *de facto* states have not collapsed (though they have generally weak economies, weak state structures, and an absence of international recognition) are that they have managed to build up internal support from the local population through propaganda and identity-building; they channel a disproportionately large part of their meagre resources into military defence; enjoy the support of a strong patron; and, in most cases, have seceded from a state that is itself very weak (Kolstø, 2006, p. 723). Another factor contributing to the sustainability of *de facto* states is the complexity of the international community's approaches to them. As explained by Relitz (2019, p. 318), international actions towards *de facto* states are framed in the stabilization dilemma. On the one hand, international actors support the stabilization of the international system through reintegration of separatist entities into their parent states, and on the other, they seek to stabilize the situation through international engagement. The dilemma is that policies directed towards one goal often have unintended and negative consequences regarding the achievement of the other.

become easier.⁷ During the 1990s and in the first few years of the new millennium, these territories were essentially closed to foreign researchers, but in the past fifteen years the practicalities of visiting these entities have become much simpler and a significant amount of studies have been based on empirical material collected on fieldtrips (Blakkisrud and Kolstø, 2012; Hoch and Kopeček, 2020). These changes have meant that the topic of internal sovereignty and various internal aspects of development in de facto states came into the spotlight for many academics and policymakers.⁸

In 2001, Charles King labelled de facto states as 'informational black holes' (King, 2001, p. 550). Since that time, social science research in de facto states has documented many aspects of internal political, social, and economic dynamics and also their external relations with the outside world. However, despite growing interest in the topics connected with de facto statehood, there are still some aspects of this issue that remain relatively under-researched. One of these topics is the strategies used by de facto state representatives in an attempt to gain international recognition. While seeking recognition remains a highly important issue for governments in de facto states, very little research exists on why, how and when the leaders of these entities decide to change their recognition strategies (Caspersen, 2015, p. 393). Valuable contributions to the study of the recognition strategies in de facto states is represented by the research made by Caspersen (2008b) and Fabry (2012), who wrote comparative studies on the legitimisation of statehood in de facto states and on strategies that focus on gaining wider international recognition in Kosovo and three de facto states in the South Caucasus. Internal narratives supporting independence have also been recently examined in Somaliland (Hoch & Rudincová, 2015), in Abkhazia (Ó Beacháin, 2019), and in Iraqi Kurdistan (Palani et al., 2019).

Whilst the prevailing view in the literature on de facto states is that these entities strive for internationally recognised independence, Kosienkowski (2017) argues that the Gagauz Republic's leaders did not primarily pursue in the initial phase the goal of independence, and instead they strived for autonomy within the reformed Soviet Union. Only after it became apparent that this was not going to happen, did Gagauzia⁹ have no other choice than to declare independence. Another example of a fluctuating independence narrative comes from Transnistria, where in the 2006 referendum virtually all Transnistrians backed the idea of Transnistria joining Russia (Dembinska & Iglesias, 2013). However, before this referendum, the goal of the Transnistrian authorities oscillated between ideas supporting the international recognition of Transnistria's full independence, creating a confederation with Moldova, and unification with Russia (Kosienkowski, 2013). The issue of independence not being mutually exclusive to the idea of unification with the patron state also exists in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh¹⁰. Mikaelian (2017, p. 24-26) claims, that the population of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is deeply divided on the question of whether Nagorno-Karabakh should be an independent state or become part of Armenia. Other examples of a blurred narrative of independence versus unification with a patron state can be documented from the separatist entities, which emerged during the period of war in Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s. Kostovicova (2004, p. 272) claims that although the Serbian leadership in Republika Srpska (originally called the Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina) declared independence, their initial aspirations were to unite with Serbia under the nationalist project of 'all Serbs in one state'. The same story also appeared in the Republic of Serbian Krajina in Croatia, where the vision of all Serbs living in one state remained fundamental to the very end. Only after Milošević, for all practical purposes, abandoned this idea did the separatist leaders hold the hope at the very least

7 Especially in the post-Soviet space, where most of the contemporary de facto states are located. The only exception in this matter is South Ossetia, which is still closed to foreign researchers.

8 For a recent overview of social science research on the topic of de facto statehood see e.g. Broers, Iskandaryan, and Minasyan, 2015; Yemelianova, 2015; Ker-Lindsay, 2017; Pegg, 2017; or Comai, 2018.

9 Gagauzia is a set of enclaves inhabited by ethnic Gagauz (Christians speaking a Turkic language), who were demanding from the beginning of the 1990s separation from Chisinau. After three years of de facto statehood, it was peacefully reintegrated into Moldova as an autonomous territorial unit.

10 The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is another example of a de facto state. The current conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis began in the second half of the 1980s, but its roots are deep, reaching back much further in time. The new constitution, which was approved in the 2017 referendum, stated that the political name of the entity was the Artsakh Republic. However, the author prefers to use in this text the political name Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and the geographical name Nagorno-Karabakh because it is better known in the English-speaking world than Artsakh.

– and as a first step towards full unification – they could create a common state with Republika Srpska in Bosnia (Kolstø & Paukovic, 2014, p. 323). The same authors further claimed that while the proclamation of independence normally signals a real aspiration for separate statehood, in the case of the Republic of Serbian Krajina, it could have also been a tactical ploy to escape the control of one state in an attempt to join another (Kolstø & Paukovic 2014, p. 310-311). In all these cases, it is evident that declared independence in a de facto state can overlap with the goal of unification with a patron state, especially when the patron is a neighbouring kin-state.

The South Ossetian narrative of the so-called '*three genocides*'

In order to understand the content of the ongoing political discussion in South Ossetia regarding the impossibility of existing within the Georgian state, and the narratives of independence versus unification with Russia, it is important to undertake a brief review of the historical markers that saturate the current political agenda in South Ossetia. The first issue that is ever-present in this context is the narrative of the so-called '*three genocides*'.

The so-called *first genocide* refers to the military operations carried out during the existence of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921). In this period, there were three large-scale uprisings by the South Ossetian population. These were initially motivated by dissatisfaction with the economic policies pursued by the central government in Tbilisi, which in the South Ossetians' opinion unfairly prioritised the interests of large Georgian landowners over those of the Ossetian peasants. In 1918, the conflict was devoid of any nationalist connotations and clearly appeared to be a social conflict. Unlike the first rebellion of 1918, the second rebellion, that broke out in October 1919, was not spontaneous. It was planned and initiated with evident support from the Bolsheviks (Saparov, 2010, p. 103-104). The combatants were two ethnically homogeneous groups – the South Ossetians (landless peasants who, under Russian influence, sought greater freedom and land rights) and the local Georgian aristocracy (to whom the land had traditionally belonged) – so the conflict quickly acquired an ethnic dimension. From 1918 onwards, a growing proportion of the South Ossetian population felt that their only source of support against the Georgians was Soviet Russia, which was keen to take control of South Ossetia. The socio-economic interests of the South Ossetian peasants thus predetermined their ethnic and political sympathies and antipathies to a substantial degree. Their dissatisfaction with the policies pursued by the Menshevik government in Tbilisi in areas with a majority Ossetian population strengthened their sympathies for the Bolsheviks. Given the traditionally warm relations between Ossetians and Russians¹¹ and the Soviet strategic interest in regaining control over Georgia, the Ossetians were able to count on both military and political support from Moscow. During the 1919 uprising, and especially in the major uprising of 1920, the South Ossetian rebels received clandestine yet substantial material support from the Red Army, and the Ossetian political elite overtly declared their desire to become part of Soviet Russia. However, in mid-1920, Moscow – reluctant to become involved in open military conflict on Georgian territory – distanced itself from its protégés in South Ossetia, and Georgian forces launched a major counter-offensive against the South Ossetian positions. This operation was accompanied by widespread ethnic cleansing; estimates range from 5,000 to 7,000 deaths, mainly of civilians, and more than 20,000 South Ossetians had to flee to Soviet Russia as the Georgian army advanced (Toal & O'loughlin, 2013; Dzidzoev, 2010).¹²

According to South Ossetian sources, the so-called *second genocide* occurred in the final years of the Soviet Union's existence. At the end of the 1980s, as a result of a power crisis in the USSR, a movement known as 'Matryoshka nationalism' emerged, sparking a process of ethno-national

11 Like Russians, the majority of Ossetians (including South Ossetians) are Orthodox Christians. This is particularly significant in the context of the northern Caucasus, where the Ossetians – surrounded by Muslim neighbours – have traditionally been considered agents of Russian colonization in the region.

12 For more on the topic of ethnic clashes between Georgians and Ossetians in 1918–1921, see e.g. Saparov (2010) or Lang (1962). An Ossetian point of view can be found on the website devoted to the 'genocide of the Ossetian nation' at www.osgenocide.ru

mobilisation. Gamsakhurdia's¹³ intransigent approach to ethnic minorities – which he viewed as a 'fifth column' of the Kremlin, and against which he frequently directed vehement verbal attacks – was shared by many Georgians. The proponents of the slogan 'Georgia for the Georgians' described ethnic minorities as guests on Georgian soil, and repeatedly threatened them (especially the Ossetians) with expulsion (Khutsishvili, 1994). This type of rhetoric, which came from leading political figures, exacerbated the already tense inter-ethnic relations in Georgia, where around a third of the population were members of ethnic minorities. This was preceded by the 'War of Laws', especially the language law and the series of laws dealing with the issue of autonomous status.¹⁴ In addition to the conflict at the legislative level, active discussion was ongoing in public circles and the media about the events that were unfolding in South Ossetia. Confrontation at the political level escalated into violence following a number of violent acts carried out by members of Georgian paramilitary forces, including the blockade of Tskhinvali. According to Ossetian sources, the blockade lasted three months (Genotsid Osetin, 2007). The conflict flared up again in the spring of 1991, as Georgians expelled Ossetians from their homes and vice versa. These clashes left dozens of people dead or injured. From mid-1991, Tskhinvali was subjected to artillery bombardment from the nearby hills, and in the autumn the city was encircled by Georgian units. This was despite the presence of around 500 troops of the Soviet Interior Ministry, who had been posted in South Ossetia since April 1991 (König, 2004). The conflict between the Georgians and the Ossetians lasted a year and a half. The war left a thousand people dead and a hundred missing; between 40,000 and 100,000 Ossetian refugees fled Georgia (including South Ossetia) to Russia,¹⁵ and 23,000 Georgian refugees moved to other regions of the country (International Crisis Group, 2004, p. 4-5). According to Ossetian sources, between 1989 and 1992 the region sustained a loss of 516.3 billion Russian roubles. About 1,000 people were killed (i.e. 1% of the total population of South Ossetia) and 3,500 were wounded; 120 people remained missing, and up to 20,000 ethnic Ossetians from South Ossetia were forced to flee to North Ossetia. Out of 365 villages, 117 were partly or completely burned and looted as a result of this conflict (Kavkazskiy Uzel, 2006).

The so-called *third genocide* is related to the five-day war between Georgia and Russia in 2008. Although cases of less intense shelling by both sides in the area had also been reported in previous years, during the summer of 2008 Georgian-South Ossetian relations deteriorated further. In July 2008, the Ossetian chief of police was killed, and armed clashes became more frequent. On the night of 8 August, these clashes escalated into heavy fighting. After five days, the war ended with a six-point plan presented by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose country held the presidency of the EU at the time. Estimates of the numbers of dead and injured have varied, in part because Russia initially granted the media and most NGOs only limited access to South Ossetia. Early claims by Russian and Ossetian sources have mentioned that 1,400–2,000 people were killed as a result of military operations; after the war, their estimates of casualties in South Ossetia were significantly reduced.¹⁶ On 15 September 2008, the Georgian government reported that 372 citizens had died, of which 168 were military servicemen, 188 civilians, and 16 police officers (Nichol, 2009, p. 15). Approximately 15,000 refugees headed to Russia, and another 20,000 fled into the interior of Georgia (International Crisis Group, 2010, p. 3).

The perceived narrative of the so-called '*three genocides*' dominates current political discourse in South Ossetia, and it is perpetually reiterated in educational institutions as well as in the state

13 Zviad Gamsakhurdia was a dissident, and at the end of the 1980s he became the leader of the Georgian national movement. Later he became the first democratically elected Georgian President.

14 For a more detailed legal analysis of the issue of separatism in South Ossetia, see e.g. Walter, von Ungern-Sternberg, and Abushov, 2014.

15 The lower figure is based on data from UNHCR (estimations as of 1998), the 100,000 figure is used by North Ossetian officials (International Crisis Group 2004, 4-5). The UN figures for 2001 estimate the total number of displaced persons as a result of the conflict at 60,000 (cited in Saparov, 2010, p. 100).

16 Compare early data from August and September 2008 (e.g. Interfax.ru, 2008; or Sputnik, 2008) with the December 2008 statement by an official in the Russian Prosecutor's Office claiming that 162 civilians had been killed in South Ossetia, and a February 2009 statement by the Russian Deputy Defence Minister claiming that 64 military personnel had been killed and 283 wounded in the region during the conflict (Nichol, 2009, p. 15).

media.¹⁷ The political reflection of this narrative is the '*Declaration of the Genocide of 1920 in South Ossetia*', which was adopted by the South Ossetian Oblast Soviet on 20 September 1990.¹⁸ In April 2006, the Parliament of the Republic of South Ossetia adopted the '*Declaration on the Genocide of the South Ossetian people in 1989-1992*' (Regnum.ru, 2006). Similarly, the 2008 war is considered by the South Ossetian state authorities to have been an act of genocide against the people of South Ossetia (e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of South Ossetia, 2013). The experience of several military campaigns, political and economic instability, social deprivation, depopulation and other post-conflict symptoms has led to a reluctance among the Ossetian population to live in the same state with Georgians, as well as to the aspiration either to achieve independence or to join the Russian Federation.

Security as an argument for unification with Russia

The next three sections are entitled *Security as an argument for unification with Russia*, *The idea of a divided nation as a basis for unification within Russia*, and *limited resources and the quest for the centralisation of power as an argument in favour of unification with Russia*. As is apparent from their titles, they are all focused on the review of current political preferences in South Ossetia regarding accession to the Russian Federation. The aim of these three sections is identifying the factors that underlie the current prevailing South Ossetian discourse supporting the idea of unification with the Russian Federation.

The narrative of the so-called '*three genocides*' – constantly reinforced by political and military confrontations during the past 25 years – has generated constant fear and uncertainty about the future in South Ossetian society. These concerns and fears have resulted in a strong interconnection between the narrative of the so-called '*three genocides*' and the current situation, in which Russia is the main guarantor of South Ossetian security.

The first President of South Ossetia, Lyudvig Chibirov, considered South Ossetian independence to be a matter of prestige, but he underlined the necessity to unite with Russia, which he saw as a guarantee protecting the Ossetian people from further genocides: "*I believe that joining the Russian Federation provides a reliable political future for the next generations. This will give us a firm guarantee to avoid all kinds of genocides that we have suffered since the 18th century, including in the 21st century*" (Osinform.ru, 2015).

The second South Ossetian President, Eduard Kokoity, argued in 2006 that Georgia's genocidal policies had forced South Ossetia to take the path of self-determination. "*The entire history of our relations says that South Ossetia's presence in the same state as Georgia threatens our people with genocide*" (Russia & CIS General Newswire, 2006). Later Kokoity added that South Ossetia's independence was only the first step, and that the next step would involve the unification of the two Ossetias (Utro.ru, 2006). It should be mentioned that during his presidency, Eduard Kokoity twice appealed to various branches of the Russian authorities to accept South Ossetia as a part of the Russian Federation (Markedonov, 2013). On the first occasion, in 2004, he directed this appeal to both chambers of the Russian State Duma, and on the second occasion he appealed to the Constitutional Court of Russia. In both cases, the issue of security played a dominant role in his argument, but these appeals did not bring about any change in the situation (Lenta.ru, 2006).

In 2012, Kokoity's successor as President, Leonid Tibilov, connected the narrative of the so-called '*three genocides*' with South Ossetia's current Russian-oriented security and foreign policy: 'New people in the Georgian government should understand and accept our fundamental and unchanging attitude to what happened between Georgia and South Ossetia. Georgia has to

¹⁷ For further details about how widespread this narrative is in the South Ossetian media, see the website of the State Committee of Information and Press of the Republic of South Ossetia – Res (RES, Gosudarstvennoye informatsionnoye agentstvo Respubliki Yuzhnaya Osetiya).

¹⁸ Its full text can be found on the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of South Ossetia: <http://www.mfa-rso.su/en/node/362>

recognise the genocide of the Ossetian people' (RES, 2012). Three years later, Tibilov cited the issue of security as one of the main reasons for conducting a referendum on accession to Russia: *"Today the political reality is that we should make our historical choice. We should unite with our Russian brothers and ensure our security for many centuries and the prosperity of our Republic and our people"* (Ekho Kavkaza, 2015a).

Likewise, the current President – Anatoly Bibilov, one of the most vocal supporters of a referendum on unification with Russia – has appealed to the Georgian authorities to apologise for the Ossetian genocide, calling the former Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili a war criminal who will have to answer many questions in front of the tribunal for the genocide of the Ossetian people (RES, 2018).

The issue of security is also predominant in statements issued by parliamentary political parties. The United Ossetia Party states: *"Existence within Russia ensures firm security for South Ossetia"* (RES, 2014). The Nykhas Party states: *"Unification with Russia is a guarantee of our security for centuries. It is a guarantee of our development despite the existence of various aggressors"* (Regnum.ru, 2015). The People's Party of South Ossetia states: *"Only within Russia can we ensure the security of South Ossetia"* (Regnum.ru, 2015). All these statements demonstrate that security is at the heart of one of the main arguments dominating proclamations by South Ossetian politicians on the idea of unification with Russia.

The idea of a divided nation as a basis for unification within Russia

Another important argument used by South Ossetian politicians in favour of accession to Russia is associated with the idea of a divided nation. Efforts to achieve the unification of South and North Ossetia within the boundaries of the Russian Federation – with the aim of unifying a divided nation – occupy a central place in the Ossetian national narrative. The debate on unification originated soon after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Ossetia's pro-unification camp has been presented as a united emancipation movement of the Ossetian peasantry against Georgian feudalism; unification is also considered the basis for the establishment of a single nation state. During the First People's Congress of the South and North Ossetian People, the following idea was expressed: *"This historical mission – to unite Ossetia and establish a united national organism, creating a common national basis for the progressive development of the Ossetian people – arose in front of us in all its greatness"* (Bliev, 2006, p. 158).

The idea of South and North Ossetia's unification experienced a revival at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, during the ascendancy of the Ossetian national movement. After the August War of 2008, debate on this subject gained a new stimulus. Inal Sanakoev, a North Ossetian specialist in humanitarian and social research, gave an interview with Bimbolat Albegov in which he made the following statement: *"If during the Soviet era the division of Ossetia was only conditional in nature, because the territories of North and South Ossetia were divided by administrative boundaries, after the collapse of the Soviet Union the issue of South Ossetia's independence gained an international juridical dimension. After the August War of 2008, this problem returned to the forefront of discussion in Ossetian society, and discourse about unification has become more common. Representatives of both South and North Ossetia have participated in this discourse"* (Albegov, 2012).

During discussions about unification, South Ossetian politicians place particular emphasis on the notion of historical justice. Dimitri Tassoev, the former Deputy Speaker of the South Ossetian Parliament, stated: *"In the 18th century, the Ossetian lands became part of the Russian Empire in a united form, not divided. We want to restore historical justice. The Ossetian people will unite"* (Albegov, 2012). Arguments of this kind were also made by Eduard Kokoity, the former de facto President of South Ossetia, when he appealed to the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation with a request to accept South Ossetia as a federative entity of the Russian Federation (Markedonov, 2013).

It is clear that local politicians and opinion makers actively exploit the idea of the divided nation as a rationale for the idea of South Ossetia's unification with Russia. From the 1990s to the present-day, opinions expressed on this topic have remained quite homogenous – not only on the part of the government, but also among opposition groups. This can again be documented in statements made by South Ossetian Presidents. Lyudvig Chibirov, the first de facto President of South Ossetia, said: *“I think first of all we will accede to the Russian Federation as an entity within the federation, and only after this will it be technically possible to accomplish our idea: to fulfil the dream of all Ossetian people, North and South Ossetia will unite as a single entity. It would be nonsense to have one people living in two separate autonomous republics within one state”* (Noguasamonga.ru, 1996; Cornell, 2001, p. 195).

Similar statements have also been made by Eduard Kokoity, Chibirov's successor as President: *“Independence is only the first stage in our struggle. We are a small nation. In order to retain our language, culture and identity, we should unite our efforts. Today, North and South Ossetia are closer to each other than ever before in the past”* (Utro.ru, 2006).

For Leonid Tibilov, who was President before the current President of South Ossetia, the unification of the two Ossetias became a political mission: *“If it occurs during my presidency, I will consider that I have fulfilled the mission assigned to the President at the present stage”* (Ria Novosti, 2013).

Anatoly Bibilov, the incumbent President of South Ossetia, shares the same opinion. Bibilov founded the Unity Party, whose ideological aim is to promote the idea of the unification of both Ossetias: *“We [South and North Ossetians] are one people. The official border, with all its formal procedures, divides us into two Ossetias. We should transform the unification into a project that is slowly but surely implemented. We should carry out the unification of legislation, equalise the living standards and social protection of citizens, develop infrastructure. This should be a serious plan that will be implemented at the level of two states”* (Albegov, 2012).

The majority of the Ossetian population backs the unification of the two Ossetias. Even those experts who see this goal as an impossible aspiration nevertheless acknowledge that the opinion of South Ossetia's population is consolidated in this regard. For example, despite the fact that Mira Tskhovrebova, the former Deputy Speaker of South Ossetia's Parliament, is sceptical about the possibility of unification, she believes that *“there is no Ossetian who opposes the idea of the unification of the two Ossetias”* – because, according to her, *“it is the age-old dream of the Ossetian people – to live in a united Ossetia”* (Kavkazskiy Uzel, 2013). During the debate about the public consensus on the unification of the two Ossetias, various experts and politicians cite the results of public opinion surveys. According to data from the most recent Ossetian public opinion survey on this topic, carried out in 2011, 92.5% of the population of South Ossetia supports unification with North Ossetia (Regnum.ru, 2011a); in this respect the mood of the South Ossetian public has hardly shifted at all in recent years. South Ossetian policy analyst Kosta Dzugaev believes that around 90% of South Ossetians continue to back unification with North Ossetia (Albegov, 2012). Similar attitudes are documented in a public opinion survey conducted by John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov and Gerard Toal, in which over 80% of South Ossetians expressed the desire for union with the Russian Federation (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, & Toal, 2014).

Limited resources and the quest for the centralisation of power as an argument in favour of unification with Russia

According to comparative studies of de facto states in the post-Soviet space, South Ossetia is the least developed region in terms of civil society, the economy and state-building efforts (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008; Spanke, 2015). Its substantial dependency on the Russian Federation and its lack of human and natural resources are presented as the strongest arguments for its unification with Russia. A leading proponent of unification with Russia, Anatoly Bibilov, considers unification to be an essential precondition for economic development. From his point of view, the lack of freedom of movement between South Ossetia and North Ossetia seriously affects economic

development (Vestnik Kavkaza, 2014). Indeed, the dependency of South Ossetia on the Russian Federation is overwhelming. According to independent experts, in economic terms South Ossetia is more dependent on Russia (and receives more funding from Russia in proportion to its budget) than any other North Caucasian republic (Pakhomienko, 2015). According to data published by Russian news agency TASS, In the period 2008–2014, Russia allocated more than 43 billion roubles to promote social and economic development in South Ossetia, 9.1 billion roubles between 2015 and 2017, and another 4.3 billion roubles are planned from the Russian budget for the years 2018–2019 (TASS.ru, 2018). Direct budget support from Russia every year, covers between 86 and 99% of the South Ossetian budget (International Crisis Group, 2010; TASS.ru, 2018).¹⁹

Another aspect of Russian economic aid is the payment of pensions in South Ossetia, the salaries of civil servants, and the state security forces. Long before their recognition of South Ossetia's independence in 2008, Russia provided passports for inhabitants of South Ossetia and most importantly, it provided security guarantees that came to be fully felt in August 2008, when Russia did not hesitate to demonstrate its support for separatists by sending its own army into the conflict with Georgia. Despite these events, however, it would not be accurate to claim that Russia provided consistent support for the separatists. Its policy underwent major shifts over the course of time.²⁰ Nevertheless, it can be claimed that without Russian material and moral support, the de facto state in South Ossetia would have hardly been able to come into existence. Political, diplomatic, military, and economic assistance from Russia are thus very closely linked and constitute a major guarantee for South Ossetia's security and the opportunity to keep the economy and social system at an acceptable level. In return for the necessary economic and political support from Russia, politicians are loyal to its interests, which reduces the real decision-making capacity of local politicians and their desire to look at all the options for a common solution to the conflict with Georgia. For Russia, there is one more benefit from the unresolved conflict. South Ossetia is a useful coercive policy tool against Georgia.²¹ This mutually advantageous interconnection creates a classic patron-client relationship. Russia's multi-layered policy towards South Ossetia, is without any doubt, absolutely essential for maintaining at least a limited form of de facto independent existence (Hoch, Souleimanov & Baranec, 2014, p. 66-68).

An important part of the debate on potential independent statehood or unification with Russia, is the size of the local population. The Statistics Department of South Ossetia released the final results of a 2016 census, which claims that the current population of South Ossetia is 53,000 people and that the majority of the population (90%) are ethnic Ossetians and only 7% of the population are ethnic Georgians (Georgia Today, 2016). However, according to estimates by the International Crisis Group and the European Council on Foreign Relations, the actual population of South Ossetia does not exceed 30,000 (International Crisis Group, 2010; Kachmazova, 2016). Many politicians in South Ossetia consider the size of the population in the de facto republic to be too small to build an independent, self-sufficient nation state. According to local experts, massive migration by the economically active population, especially young people, will exacerbate the lack of human capital even in the mid-term perspective. *"If out of ten South Ossetians, seven young people leave South Ossetia and aim to stay in North Ossetia, who will live in an independent South Ossetia?"* (Kavkazskiy Uzel, 2014b). Some experts from South Ossetia consider the existence of South Ossetia as an independent state to be unfeasible. For example, the political scientist Kosta Dzugaev holds the following opinion: *"Only 10% of the total population of Ossetia live in South Ossetia. This figure is insufficient for building an independent state even when receiving Russian support. The logic of the national movement forces us to address the issue of unification"* (Albegov, 2012).

Another internal problem articulated in the South Ossetian public space involves the inefficiency of the local authorities, the clan-type governance and a high level of corruption. Because the de facto authorities in Tskhinvali are not able to solve these problems, the local population sees joining Russia as the only solution. In the opinion of the Russian expert Sergey Markedonov:

19 For further details about the performance of the South Ossetian economy, its internal structure and cross border trade see e.g. Baarová, 2019, p. 162-168; Prelz Oltramonti 2013, p. 237-253.

20 For more on the topic of relations between Russia and South Ossetia see e.g. Ambrosio and Lange, 2016 or German, 2016.

21 For more on this issue see e.g. Souleimanov, Abrahamyan, and Aliyev, 2018.

“Ordinary citizens of South Ossetia are not satisfied with the situation in the republic. They think that with the participation of the Russian Federation in the processes of South Ossetia’s governance (without middlemen and trusted persons) the situation will improve” (Markedonov, 2014).

To sum it up, in South Ossetia, unification with the Russian Federation is thus generally considered to be an instrument for unifying a divided nation, for boosting economic development, enhancing the security situation in the region, halting the trend of massive outward migration from South Ossetia, as well as a way of ensuring better governance.

Arguments of those against unification

After three sections devoted to identifying and explaining the preferences in South Ossetia regarding unification with the Russian Federation, this section aims to introduce the arguments of those opposed to this political unification. First, it needs to be said that it is not a simple task to identify the genuine opponents to the idea of South Ossetia’s unification with the Russian Federation. This is due to that fact that politicians’ statements in this regard are inconsistent (and in some cases self-contradictory). Nevertheless, such opinions do exist in South Ossetia. Addressing the desire of local elites to undermine the idea of unification with Russia, some politicians claim that, if the unification process were to begin, the interests of local bureaucrats would be endangered. Alan Jussoev, the deputy director of the internal affairs department in the South Ossetian presidential administration, has stated: *“I do not think that our elites say a consistent ‘yes’ to the idea of joining Russia. High-ranking officials understand that if our institutions are reorganised to converge with Russian structures, 80 per cent of them will lose their jobs” (Meduza.io, 2015).* A similar idea was confirmed by Tengiz Doguzov, editor-in-chief of the journal *Vestnik Osetii*: *“It must be said that there are forces in South Ossetia that oppose the idea of unification. Many state officials are simply afraid of losing their well-paid posts and privileges in the case of joining Russia” (Sviridova, 2015).*

In addition, joining the Russian Federation does not necessarily bring any additional guarantees of security. Indeed, viewed from a certain perspective, it could even damage the interests of the South Ossetian people in the long term – if more liberal-minded people were to take power in Moscow. The Ossetian journalist Alan Parastaev explains this point of view, which also resonates in the South Ossetian public space: *“If Putin is replaced, the new leader may decide to give us back to Georgia. If we were part of Russia, it would be much easier for them to give us back to Georgia than in the current situation” (Meduza.io, 2015).*

One of the visible opponents of unification is Viliam Dzagoev, the former South Ossetian Minister of Economic Development. In his opinion, South Ossetia may (in economic terms) lose more than it gains if it joins Russia. *“Independence is an advantage for our monetary policy, in which all tax rates are lower: income tax is 12%, and VAT is 10%. In addition, due to the fact that Russia does not apply export duties on South Ossetia, gasoline and other products are cheaper here than in North Ossetia. Salaries are therefore the same as in North Ossetia, while taxes and prices are lower. Is it not better to remain independent?” (Meduza.io, 2015).*

However, the most common argument raised by the opponents of unification with the Russian Federation is connected to Russia’s inability to take this step, given the geopolitical reality that has emerged since the annexation of Crimea. According to this view, unification with the Russian Federation is unrealistic as it could provoke further sanctions against Russia and a further deterioration of Moscow’s relations with the West. According to Mira Tskhovrebova, the former Deputy Speaker of the South Ossetian Parliament, there is no point in holding another referendum, as Russia currently implicitly rejects the idea of unification. *“Russia is not ready to incorporate us either as an independent republic or as a part of North Ossetia. Vladimir Putin and Dimitri Medvedev have expressed their views on this matter several times. Similar opinions have also been expressed at various conferences and roundtables focusing on South Ossetia and its [geopolitical] location in the South Caucasus” (Kavkazskiy Uzel, 2013).* Viacheslav Gobozov, the leader of the non-parliamentary Fatherland Socialist Party, expressed a similar opinion: *“It makes no sense to hold a referendum in*

the absence of consent from Russia. Moscow has repeatedly made it clear that at this stage, it is rather comfortable with the current status of South Ossetia as an independent state" (Meduza.io, 2015). Alexei Chesnakov, a former deputy head of the Russian Presidential Administration's Internal Policy Directorate, and a political analyst close to the Kremlin, also believes that the agreement on alliance and integration signed in March 2015 is enough: "*Moscow is satisfied with the current pace of integration processes. There is no need to give them new incentives*" (Sinelschikova, 2015).

One explanation of Russia's unwillingness to cooperate in the unification process comes from Dimitri Medoev, the South Ossetian Foreign Minister. In his view, unification would give additional impetus to the criticism levelled against South Ossetia and Russia by Georgia and its allies in the West: "*However, the accusations against Russia regarding the so-called 'occupation' still persist. Why should we give another reason and additional arguments to the opponents of Russia?*" (Regnum.ru, 2011b). Another explanation is based on the additional economic costs that Russia would incur in the event of unification. From this point of view, it would be rather difficult for Russia to implement the unification process adequately. Alan Jusoev explained this obstacle: "*We have no air connections or rail traffic with Russia. Solutions for transport-related issues are very expensive, and you need to develop many industries locally. I don't think Russia is ready for that*" (Meduza.io, 2015).

There is one more important barrier to unifying South Ossetia with its northern neighbour, the rather hesitant approach of North Ossetia. North Ossetians and South Ossetians, though in many respects close to each other, report many social, cultural and political differences.²² Another factor that creates tension between the Ossetian population is the number of refugees who fled to North Ossetia as a result of violence, and later on as migrants connected with the vulnerable South Ossetian economy. The North Ossetian police frequently blame South Ossetians for illegal arms trading, racketeering, robberies and other crimes. All of these issues have reportedly soured relations between the two territories (Minority Rights Group International: Ossetians, 2019). These differences can also be seen in the results of a public opinion survey conducted in North and South Ossetia in autumn 2011. While more than 90% of the population in South Ossetia expressed their support for the idea of unification with its northern neighbour, only about half of the population in North Ossetia expressed support for unification (Baarová, 2019).

The calls for the unification of the two regions thus come mainly from South Ossetia. The position adopted by the North Ossetian elites to this issue could be described as a strategic silence rather than enthusiastic support for the idea. Though the idea of unification of both Ossetias has been previously articulated by the President of North Ossetia, Taimuraz Mamsurov, his successors to the post of head of North Ossetia, Tamerlan Aguzarov and Viatcheslav Bitarov, did not openly express their willingness to unify with South Ossetia. They both took part in many celebrations marking important anniversaries in South Ossetia and called for a deep and friendly cooperation in cultural, economic and social issues, but mostly on a platform of 'one nation – two countries'. An illustration of this fact may be a speech by President Aguzarov at the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the proclamation of the Republic of South Ossetia, where he wished the people and the leadership of South Ossetia success, good luck and well-being, and said: "*I have always said: We are two republics, but we are one people*" (Republic of North Ossetia-Alania official portal, 2015a). Equally hesitant and cautious in this sense are the speeches of the current head of North

²² One of them is language. Most academic texts refer to the same Indo-European language spoken by Ossetians inhabiting both North and South Ossetia. The reality is a bit more complicated. Of the two Ossetian dialects, Digor is spoken in the west of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania and in neighbouring Kabardino-Balkaria, and Iron in the east of North Ossetia and in South Ossetia. The two Ossetian dialects are sufficiently different as to not be mutually comprehensible. Most speakers of Digor can understand Iron, but not vice versa. There are, for example, some 2,500 words in Digor that do not exist in Iron and the phonetic, morphological, and lexical differences between them appear to be greater than between Chechen and Ingush (Fuller, 2015). There also exist many other differences between North and South Ossetia, which are creating obstacles for political integration. For example, South Ossetians (as Russian citizens) are well integrated into the economy of North Ossetia. Half of the population of the Republic of South Ossetia has already acquired private property on the territory of North Ossetia, which cannot be said vice versa. The population of South Ossetia can vote and be elected in North Ossetian elections. But because of a controversial residency Law, which dictates permanent residence in the territory of the Republic of South Ossetia for the last 10 years before elections, North Ossetians, cannot participate in political life in South Ossetia. In this sense, Journalist Anna Chochieva is asking a rhetorical question: 'Is it possible to propose the unification of the people, economy and culture, depriving the representatives of this people (most of whom live in North Ossetia), the opportunity to fully participate in the political and economic life of South Ossetia?' (Chochieva, 2018).

Ossetia. Two months before signing the alliance and integration treaty between South Ossetia and the Russian Federation, he commented on the draft of the treaty in the following way: *“This treaty is a historical chance for us to make a very big step towards the integration of the economy and social sphere of South Ossetia into the concerns of Russia”* (Republic of North Ossetia-Alania official portal, 2015b). Again, there was no word of support for the political unification of the two regions, and the same applies to his subsequent public speeches. It is therefore clear that while the desire to unite with North Ossetia currently prevails in South Ossetia as one of the most important political goals, in Moscow and Vladikavkaz these political preferences are far from being taken as seriously.

The question of a referendum and its internal political implications

Political leaders in South Ossetia have mentioned on many occasions that the whole question of unification with the Russian Federation or the preservation of de facto independent statehood should be decided in another referendum on the subject. The last section of this article is thus devoted to the preparation for this announced referendum, and to the analysis of the political implications connected with this scenario. In this context, an important question arises: who influences whom? Are the masses being led and manipulated by their elites or vice versa? In the case of South Ossetia, it is a two-way process. On the one hand, voters of course influence the behaviour of politicians, who naturally try to follow the majority opinion in South Ossetian society. On the other hand, in a very authoritarian regime, as South Ossetia without any doubt is,²³ politicians shape public opinion and, above all, they are shaped by the attitude of Russia, which is by far the most important player in this regard. Therefore, the answer to this question is not simple, but rather a puzzle of different interlocking pieces. The aim of the following pages is to present these parts of the puzzle.

The idea of unification is a political issue around which most of the voters coalesce, so the behaviour of political parties is not surprising in this respect. For example, the political platform of the Unity Party (founded in 2003, which for a decade was South Ossetia’s largest political party, holding a majority in the Parliament) was completely built on the idea of the unification of the two Ossetias. Before the parliamentary elections in 2014, its leader Anatoly Bibilov transformed the party into a new republican political party, United Ossetia. In the most recent parliamentary elections, this party obtained 20 seats out of 34. According to a statement by Bibilov, who became the President of South Ossetia after the 2017 presidential elections, the main objective of United Ossetia is to bring South Ossetia back within the boundaries of Russia (Vestnik Kavkaza, 2014). The other three political parties represented in the Parliament (Unity of the People, the People’s Party of South Ossetia and Nykhas) also support a referendum and the idea of unification with Russia (Ekho Kavkaza, 2015b).

Before 2015, South Ossetia’s President, Leonid Tibilov, made very cautious statements about unification with Russia. The main arguments of Tibilov and his supporters were based on the assumption that South Ossetia’s accession to Russia could provoke severe criticism and additional sanctions from the West. For example, in a statement from 15 January 2015, he accused the Unity Party of political manipulation by exploiting the idea of unification. He emphasised two important arguments. First, as a result of a Russian presidential decree issued on 26 August 2008, Russia in fact supported and recognised the will of the South Ossetian people as expressed in the referendums of 1992 and 2006 – both of which backed independence. The relations between the two countries were thus based on this fact. Second, Tibilov argued that the idea of a referendum affected (whether directly or indirectly) the interests of the Russian Federation, which was a strategic partner of South Ossetia (Kavkazskiy Uzel, 2014a). In his subsequent statements, Tibilov supported the idea of unification but underlined the fact that this issue was not yet on the agenda: *“I think the idea of unification with Russia genuinely exists in our society; it is not a secret. We will try to implement this idea, but we are not yet bringing it to the table because we have to take into account many things”* (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2015).

23 See e.g. Freedom in the World 2019 report for South Ossetia issued by Freedom House. Retrieved from <https://freedom-house.org/country/south-ossetia/freedom-world/2019>

However, during a meeting with Vladislav Surkov²⁴ on 19 October 2015, Tibilov stated that he was planning to conduct a referendum on the issue of unification with Russia (RES, 2015). This statement significantly changed the configuration of the internal political struggle in South Ossetia. Until that moment, the Speaker of the Parliament had been accused of 'privatising' the idea of unification; however, President Tibilov's new initiative – and the fact that the initiative received support from the majority of political parties – shifted the ground on which political disputes took place. Tibilov's initiative was based on the following legal arguments: *"In the legal sense, the results of the referendum held in 2006 annulled the results of the 1992 referendum [during which the population of South Ossetia had supported accession to Russia]. Therefore, it is necessary to hold a new referendum on accession to the Russian Federation"* (Utro.ru, 2015). On the other hand, some experts considered Tibilov's move to be politically motivated and part of his electoral campaign – because by presenting this issue, he tried to seize the initiative from his main political opponent, Anatoly Bibilov: *"In this situation, Leonid Tibilov is trying to gain political capital before the presidential elections. It is an attempt to remove the initiative from his strong political rival, for whom this subject is a strategic issue"* (Ekho Kavkaza, 2015b).

Since that time, the domestic political scene in South Ossetia has been dominated by the debate over whether, when, and how the region should eventually become part of Russia. From the autumn of 2015 to April 2017, the main area of dispute between Tibilov and Bibilov has concerned the approach to the referendum. As Kochieva (2016) explains: *"While Bibilov has long called for full integration with Russia through a merger with North Ossetia, Tibilov would like to preserve some semblance of independence – and presumably control over financial flows – by having South Ossetia incorporated into Russia as a separate federal entity rather than as part of a Greater Ossetia"* (Kochieva, 2016).

In late December 2015, Tibilov announced that a referendum should take place long before the 2017 presidential elections, and should also contain a question on whether or not to rename the region 'Republic of South Ossetia–State of Alania'. Bibilov rejected this plan and reiterated his proposal to conduct the referendum on the sole question of whether or not South Ossetia should become part of Russia. The two rivals finally reached agreement in May 2016. In order to preserve domestic political stability, they agreed that the referendum should take place only after the 2017 presidential election. However, by scheduling the referendum on the name change for 9 April 2017 (at the same time as the presidential elections), Tibilov violated this agreement (Fuller, 2017).

Among the other potential presidential candidates, the only one who wanted to uphold South Ossetia's nominally independent status was the former President Eduard Kokoity. Before the election, in an interview to Interfax, he stated: *"The President of South Ossetia should be a person who will strengthen the country's independence and expand the strategic partnership with Russia"* (Interfax.ru, 2016). Kokoity failed to meet the requirement that presidential candidates must have spent at least nine months of each of the ten years prior to an election living in South Ossetia. He was refused registration as a presidential candidate by the Central Electoral Commission due to the fact that he has lived in Russia since he left office in late 2011. Since the outset, Moscow has made it very clear that it will not support Kokoity (Kavkazskiy Uzel, 2016; Silayev, 2016). A possible reason for the Russian reluctance to support the former President of South Ossetia's candidacy, was his criticism of the deployment of Russian border guards in South Ossetia in the autumn of 2016. The second reason for him being unpopular in Moscow is the alleged embezzlement of millions of roubles Moscow made available for the reconstruction of homes and infrastructure destroyed during the August 2008 war. An additional fact that did not help him in getting Russian support, was the good personal ties of his opposing candidates Tibilov and Bibilov with Surkov. They have always both been very loyal to Moscow and received the imaginary green light from Surkov during his February visit to Tskhinvali. Therefore, there was no need for Moscow to support Kokoity, a man with a controversial reputation.

Presidential elections were held on 9 April 2017, along with a referendum on renaming South Ossetia as 'Republic of South Ossetia–State of Alania'. Bibilov received almost 55% of the votes,

24 At that time Vladislav Surkov was the Russian President's aide for relations with Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the Donbass region.

so he became the new President of South Ossetia in the first round of the ballot. Over 79% of voters also supported the name change. The official name 'Republic of South Ossetia–State of Alania' is a clear analogy with North Ossetia–Alania, and President Bibilov continued in his goal of unification with Russia. Soon after the election he made a statement: "I am a staunch supporter of South Ossetia's entry into the Russian Federation ... We are Russian citizens, our economy is tied to Russia, salaries and programmes are financed from the Russian budget ... This is a historical injustice, when one nation is divided, and we must correct this injustice" (Georgia Today, 2017). In an interview with the BBC's Russian service, Bibilov added: *"Everyone in South Ossetia thinks that the Republic of South Ossetia is an independent state. However, if we think deeply, we see the division of ethnicity ... The likelihood that South Ossetia will join Russia is one hundred per cent"* (News.am, 2017).

During the period from 2015 to 2017, the referendum on joining Russia was the most important topic in South Ossetian domestic politics. However, this issue has remained somewhat overlooked since the most recent presidential elections. One explanation for this retreat from the centre of attention might be connected to Russia's unpreparedness or unwillingness to take a further step towards incorporating South Ossetia, at least at the present time. During his visit to Moscow, President Bibilov stated: *"The union is possible only within Russia, by the reunification of North and South Ossetia ... We all clearly understand it, but understanding is one thing, the political process is another"* (News.am, 2017).

Conclusion

The majority of the South Ossetian population, as well as the South Ossetian political elite, currently back the idea of unification with Russia. The idea of being part of Georgia does not resonate in South Ossetian society at this stage. Designating Georgian–Ossetian relations under the history of the so-called '*three genocides*' has become part of the South Ossetian national narrative. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, members of the pro-Russian government in Tskhinvali have been presenting the history of Ossetian–Georgian relations as evidence of perceived malice and brutality on the part of the Georgians, which has resulted in a strong unwillingness to co-exist within a single state. The main argument that dominates the proclamations of South Ossetian politicians regarding the idea of unification with Russia is associated with the issue of security. The unification of South Ossetia with North Ossetia is understood as a significant guarantee that in the future, Russia will not refuse to protect South Ossetia – even if there is a radical change in Russia's internal political situation in favour of Georgia. The second argument in favour of accession to Russia – an argument which frequently appears in the statements of the South Ossetian political elite – is the idea that only one Ossetia exists, and that the present division is a result of actions carried out by various external forces. The third reason for unification with Russia is the opinion that only 10% of the total Ossetian population lives in South Ossetia, which makes it impossible to build an independent state there. Therefore, according to this logic, unification is the only way to protect Ossetian interests. Other important factors which can explain this currently prevailing South Ossetian narrative are the population's fatigue in the face of the incompetence of local elites, as well as their aspirations for Russian centralisation.

Many public statements made by South Ossetian politicians on accession to the Russian Federation indicate the need for a referendum on this matter. However, some people consider the issue of the referendum to be a 'gambling chip' in the hands of local populist politicians, who frequently bring the issue up in the run-up to elections. Opponents of the referendum (which is commonly viewed as the first step in the process of unification) do not necessarily oppose the idea of unification per se; their argument is based on the idea that in the current situation, joining Russia is an impossibility. According to this view, accession to Russia is not feasible at this stage, and therefore the whole idea of a referendum is a populist strategy, which only distracts people from the real problems facing South Ossetia. Since the 2017 presidential elections, the issue of the referendum has retreated from its former position as the most intensely discussed issue in domestic South Ossetian politics. Because there are no signs of South Ossetia changing the course of its foreign policy, a possible explanation lies in Russia's unpreparedness and unwillingness to take any steps

to further integrate South Ossetia into its structures. It is obvious that such a referendum would require Russia to take a subsequent stance. After the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbass and the deterioration of Russia's relations with the West, any further escalation of tensions with Georgia, the EU and the USA would place an excessive burden on Russia – especially considering how little Russia would actually gain from incorporating this tiny and economically poor region. The decision whether and when such a referendum could take place now apparently lies with Moscow. It appears, however, that the current status quo suits Russian interests rather well, so Moscow feels no need to rush matters. For the South Ossetian political elite, with its prevailing integrationist approach, the next period will presumably be about waiting until the time is right.

Though, the prevailing discourse in South Ossetia is supportive of the idea of unification with the Russian Federation, it was not always the case. This can be seen by the results of the 2006 referendum, where the majority of the population favoured the idea of full sovereignty and independence, or in the many statements mentioned above, made by important public figures in South Ossetia. The explanation for this ambiguity is that the ideas of independence and unification with Russia are not mutually exclusive concepts in South Ossetia. They do in fact, significantly overlap each other. The narrative articulated by South Ossetian politicians depicts independence as the first step in the process, and unification with Russia as the second. In this sense, the situation is not so different from that in Transnistria, where the question in the 2006 independence referendum was: 'Do you support the course towards independence for the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic and its subsequent free unification with the Russian Federation?' The overwhelming majority of Transnistrian voters were in favour of this course. Because similar fuzzy narratives of independence versus unification with a kin-state have also been previously documented in other de facto states, such as Republika Srpska, Republic of Serbian Krajina or the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, it is not so surprising to read the proclamations made by South Ossetian politicians who mention the goal of independence, yet at the same time support accession to the Russian Federation.

As is evident from the analysis presented in this article, the aim of seeking international recognition of independence is not currently the only goal or the dominant one in South Ossetia. According to the research by Kosienkowski (2013 and 2017) and Mikaelian (2017), there are doubts about the importance and relevance of this issue also in other former or present-day de facto states (such as Transnistria, Gagauzia and Nagorno-Karabakh). Therefore, is it useful to define de facto states as entities seeking international recognition of their independence? The author of this study suggests, that it would be better to abandon this way of thinking, because de facto states could also seek to join another country or to maintain the status quo. Their aims can also be fuzzy, may change in time, and under certain circumstances may also overlap each other.

Why does this overlap in the independence narrative arise in de facto states? Based on this case study of South Ossetia, it could be argued that the narrative of independence mixed with the idea of unification with a patron state appears at a condition when: a) independence is perceived in a de facto state as a stepping stone to escape from the orbit of a parent state when the ultimate goal is merging with a patron state; b) there is not enough will-power for the unification from the side of the patron state, because an irredentism would be more burdensome for the patron than formal or informal de facto statehood support. However, further comparative research on this topic in other de facto states should be conducted to confirm or disprove this more general conclusion.

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