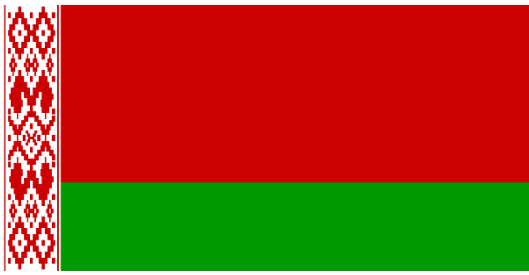


Belarus and Abkhazia



Belarusian Foreign Policy Responding to Abkhazia's Self Proclaimed Independence

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Introduction

‘The Republic of Abkhazia intends to build up its relations with other States on the basis of equality, peace, good-neighbourly relations, respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and other universally recognised principles of political, economic and cultural cooperation between States’ (Declaration of Independence, 1999).

These exact words can be found in the Declaration of Independence of Abkhazia as presented by the S. Djindjolia, former speaker of the People's Assembly of the Republic of Abkhazia. For Abkhazia this marked the beginning of the official independence from Georgia. However, this independence was not recognised by Georgia or any other state at that time. It would take nine more years to get recognised by a total of four states: Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru. Up to this day, these are the only states that recognise Abkhazia as independent from Georgia. Ever since the declaration of independence by the people of Abkhazia, it has been reaching out to other states to get recognised as independent. In the (political) conflict that preceded as well as succeeded the declaration of independence there are two major players aside from Georgia. These are the European Union and Russia. Russia should be considered an important actor because of its recognition of Abkhazia in 2008 as well as its (military) interference in the Georgian – Abkhaz conflict. The EU has heavily condemned the actions of Russia and has multiple projects to improve relations with Georgia. The majority of the academic literature and research concerning the foreign relations of Abkhazia and its independence focus mainly on Georgia, the EU, and Russia as important factors and actors.

This thesis will look at the shared neighbourhood of Russia and the EU with the main focus on Belarus and its policy towards the self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia. Up until now, Belarus has not been a point of focus in the literature when discussing the independence of Abkhazia. As this thesis will show, Belarus is an important point of focus in the foreign policy of Abkhazia and therefore, alongside other reasons, makes it an important case to look

at. The research question of this thesis is: *how has Belarusian foreign policy responded to the case of Abkhazia's self-proclaimed independence?*

To answer this question, the thesis will have the following structure: In chapter 1, I will discuss several concepts related to the topic of statehood, de facto states and how states gain recognition. Chapter 2 will look into reasons why Abkhazia believes it should be seen as independent from Georgia. This will be done by providing a historical background of Abkhazia as well as applying the criteria of the Montevideo Convention to this case. Furthermore, this chapter will explore the benefits of state recognition for Abkhazia. Subsequently, Chapter 3 will explore the international response to the proclamation of independence by Abkhazia. First the motives of Russia and the EU are discussed. This is followed by a focus on the five countries in the shared neighbourhood: Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus and how they relate to Abkhazia. In the final chapter, the main focus will lie with the foreign policy of Belarus towards the self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia. First an analysis of the foreign policy of the EU and Russia on this region with a special emphasis on the relation between the EU and Belarus, and Russia and Belarus will be provided. By this, the context in which the decision making took place is provided. The decision making by Belarus can be subdivided into three time zones: 1999-2008, 2008-2010 and 2010 onwards. The main sources used for this chapter are official publications from the Presidents, political authorities and Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Belarus and Abkhazia as well as state-owned news agencies from both countries. After this, the justification by Belarus is focused on as well as the place of Belarus between the EU and Russia in relation to this case of self-proclaimed independency. Finally, the thesis will look at the importance of Abkhazia's argument in the decision-making by Belarus. The main argument of this thesis is that Abkhazia has barely had any influence on the decision making by Belarus, but that the decision made was merely a trade-off between relations with the EU or Russia.

Chapter 1: Conceptual Framework

In the following chapter, several concepts are elaborated upon. These concepts are necessary to engage with recognising states, state independence and how *de facto* states can be dealt with further on. This chapter is divided into several sections with individual topics. The first section will focus on what states are and how a state emerges. After that, the criteria for defining statehood will be elaborated upon. This will be done based on the criteria of the Montevideo Convention. Thirdly, *de facto* states are explained and how other states can deal with *de facto* states. This will be followed by a section on how states gain recognition and how states can recognise other states. After this, a conclusion will be presented.

1.1 States

When analysing the independence of a state or country, it is important to know what exactly a state is and how a region may or may not become a state. The definition of a state may vary according to the author as well as to what aspects of a state are studied. Since there have been many theories as well as definitions for state, I will focus on the modern state for this thesis. There is not, nor will there be, a consensus on the definition of state. Hence, for this thesis, I use the definition by Max Weber.

'The modern state possesses an administrative and legal order subject to change by legislation, to which the organized activities of the administrative staff, which are also controlled by regulations, are oriented. This system of orders claims binding authority, not only over members of the state, the citizens, most of whom have obtained membership by birth, but also to a very large extent over all action taking place in the area of its jurisdiction. ... It is thus a compulsory organization with a territorial basis. Furthermore, today, the use of force is

regarded as legitimate only so far as it is either permitted by the state or prescribed by it' (Weber 1978, 54-56).

Literature often writes about statehood in combination with international law. Reason for this is that most international disputes with a legal background or internal affairs such as human rights violations often reduce to the matter of statehood or the states involved. (Crawford 1977, 94).

Prior to being recognised, a state must be formed. This leads to the two theories of state, namely the constitutive and declaratory theories of state. The foundation of the constitutive theory is that a state is a state and can only be a state if it gets recognised by other states (Talmon 2005, 102). This theory has been contested by a newer, currently more predominant view, which is the declaratory theory of state which states that 'the international legal personality of a State and its concomitant rights and obligations solely depend on it being able to satisfy the criteria for statehood' (Talmon 106, 2005). In short, the constitutive theory of state claims a state can only be a state when it gets recognised by other states, whereas the declaratory theory of state claims that recognition is not needed, but that a state can be a state when it exists conform the criteria for statehood. These two theories oppose but also complement each other, leaving room for debate.

Although both theories clearly describe the conditions needed to become a state, neither can explain nor provide a certain outcome for fights for independence. The constitutive theory does not provide an insight in what a state should do to be recognised as a state. On the contrary, the declaratory theory of state claims that a region should adhere to the criteria for statehood.

1.2 What defines a state?

The most important criteria for statehood are defined in the Montevideo Convention which was signed on December 26, 1933 in Montevideo, Uruguay. Although this was an inter-American convention, its criteria shaped the perception of statehood globally (Horbach, Lefeber & Ribbelink 2007, 166). It should be noted, however, that this convention was about the creation of states rather than the continuation of a state, which some might argue is the case in Abkhazia. In article 1 of the convention, it is stated that:

'The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states.'

(Montevideo Convention 1933)

Although these notions are presented in this convention, it should be mentioned that this was an inter-American convention which was not signed by parties directly involved in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Aside from that, it is important to realise that this convention was held in 1933, followed by major international events which could have affected the view on these articles. Although these major global events might have changed certain perceptions, the European Union used the same principles from the Montevideo Convention in the Badinter Arbitration Committee to decide whether to or not to recognise Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia in 1991 (Pellet 182, 1992). Furthermore, the Montevideo Convention can provide an insight on the recognition of states since article 1 still provides certain set of characteristics a state requires, in order to be a state according to the declaratory theory of state. These criteria of the Montevideo Convention tie in with the definition of a state by Weber.

1.3 De facto states

When a region declares independence but does not get recognised as independent, it becomes a de facto state. A de facto state is subjected to two main criteria. There must be a political leadership that has been organised and risen to power. Secondly it should have sufficient support and capacity to rule over a population and territory for a durable time span (Pegg 1998, 1). Another important factor is that a de facto state seeks but does not achieve recognition from the international community although partial recognition might be present. This can also be because the de facto governmental control over a defined territory may be considered as illegitimate.

In contrast to de facto states, there are also de jure states. The difference between de facto and de jure states can be narrowed down to two core principles: (1) de facto states have the necessities of being a state (i.e. a structure, political processes and institutions), but (2) it lacks international recognition which would grant it its sovereignty and independence (Steinsdorff and Fruhstorfer 2012, 118). Especially de facto states have an impact on two aspects of international politics which are political economy and conflict. The latter one is of great importance in the case of Abkhazia with its direct conflicts in 1992-1993 and 2008.

De facto states can be effective even though they are illegitimate. For these states, 'internal sovereignty is ... not ruled out by lack of external sovereignty' (Caspersen 2009, 47). Although this internal sovereignty is of great importance to the de facto state and possibly of greater importance than external sovereignty, both the emergence and continuation of de facto states are near impossible to explain without external factors. These usually appear in the form of a "patron state" which could argue that de facto states are merely subjected to these "patron states", which makes the de facto state a "puppet state". This in turn cancels out the sovereignty (Caspersen 2009, 47-49).

There are generally three ways of dealing with de facto states by the international community aside from recognising it. These three ways are opposing the de facto state, ignoring the de facto state and acknowledging the de facto state to a certain amount (Pegg 1998, 4). Although only a few states recognise Abkhazia, it is not completely isolated from the rest of the world. This is possible by engaging with a state, but not recognising it. For Abkhazia as well as other states, this can prove to be useful.

1.4 State Recognition

It is apparent that de facto states, Abkhazia included, strive for independence and international recognition. The recognition of a state comes with two major benefits which are ‘official intercourse ... [and] numerous political and commercial treaties’ (Economist 1924, 623). This can be further explained by the limits of not being recognised. When a state does not get recognised by other states in the international community, its major limitation is the international isolation. This results in being unable to manoeuvre within this international community. In other words, de facto states cannot become externally independent without the international recognition and will be dependent on their patron states (Caspersen 2009, 58).

Lacking this recognition might not stop a de facto state from emerging, but it might interfere with the states survival since external independence is vital for a state’s existence in the long run. For some new de facto states such as Abkhazia it can eventually become a choice between ‘embracing dependence or abandoning recognition’ (Caspersen 2009, 56). Although it cannot be considered a vital aspect for the survival of a state, being recognised as a state provides a form of self-worth. When a country is not recognised, often in the media it is portrayed as “self-proclaimed” which can be perceived as belittling when trying to gain recognition.

The main way in which states get recognised is through an official declaration by other states. In 1936, the Institute of International Law passed a resolution in which state recognition as an act was adopted. Article 2 states that ‘recognition emanates from the authority competent, according to the public law of the State, to represent it in foreign relations’ (Institut de Droit International, 1936). De jure recognition, according to article 4, results from either a state declaration (explicit) or from engaging in diplomatic relations of sorts (implicit) (Institut de Droit International, 1936). The implicit recognition of state recognition is a contested and outdated form of recognising states.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the concept of state has been discussed. For this paper, the definition by Weber is used to describe a state. States can exist in accordance with two theories, the constitutive theory of state and declaratory theory of state. The constitutive theory of state argues that a state can only be seen as a state if it gets recognised as such by other states. Alternatively, the declaratory theory of state argues that a state is a state if it adheres to certain criteria. The possible criteria for statehood have been agreed upon in the Montevideo Convention in 1933. These criteria are that a state needs a permanent population, a defined territory, a government and the capacity to enter into relations with the other states (Montevideo Convention, 1933). This narrowly ties in with the definition of a state by Weber.

De facto states are states that are not recognised as states by other states. In these de facto states, a political leadership needs to be organised and gained power. Furthermore, it needs to be able to durably rule over a territory and population. There are three ways to deal with de facto states aside from recognising it. States can ignore the existence, partially recognise it or oppose its existence. For a de facto state, international recognition mainly provides opportunities to manoeuvre within the international community. In the following chapters, the

Montevideo Convention as well as the concept of de facto states and how states can deal with de facto states will be used to answer the research question.

Chapter 2: Abkhazia and its quest for recognition

In this chapter, the main focus will lie with Abkhazia and its self-declared independence. First, a brief history of Abkhazia will be provided in order to familiarise with the conflict that preceded the declaration of independence by Abkhazia. This is followed by the four criteria of the Montevideo Convention and how these relate to the independence and (argued) statehood of Abkhazia. The third section will look into with Abkhazia as seen as a puppet state. After this, the benefits of recognition will be discussed. This includes citizenship, membership to international organizations but also the costs of being recognised as an independent state. Finally, a conclusion will be presented. This chapter will provide an understanding to why Abkhazia has claimed independence from Georgia and whether the existence of Abkhazia as a state can be justified using the Montevideo criteria.

2.1 History of Abkhazia

Prior to understanding Abkhazia's claim on independence, it is important to familiarise with the history of the breakaway region in Georgia. The following section will provide an overview of the history of Abkhazia since the invasion of Georgia by the Red Army in 1921. The full history of Abkhazia goes back much further than this, some argue even 500 thousand years when a settlement near modern Sukhumi was built. With the introduction of Christianity in the first century CE, a new era started. Between 786 and the end of the 10th century, the first Abkhaz Kingdom existed, which was succeeded by the Kingdom of Abkhaz and Kartvels till the end of the 13th century. After this kingdom ceased to exist, both Russia and the Ottoman Empire have ruled over this area which was most often described as the Abkhaz principedom (President of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2018).

After the invasion in 1921, the Socialist Soviet Republic of Abkhazia (SSR Abkhazia) was formed. This officially lasted till December 16, 1921 when SSR Abkhazia engaged in a

treaty with the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (Georgian SSR). This treaty implied a de-facto independence from the Georgian SSR and therefore Abkhazia held a special status within the USSR.

Since it was not fully incorporated within the Georgian SSR, it was free to join the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1922. In 1931, the Georgian authorities further incorporated Abkhazia in the Georgian SSR, resulting in the end of the SSR Abkhazia which would become the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Abkhaz ASSR) (Shenfield, 2010). This republic was an official region within the Georgian SSR. The incorporation was arguably a first step towards undermining Abkhaz authority.

During the Great Purge between 1936 and 1938 the majority of Abkhaz political actors were removed from power within Abkhazia as well as the Georgian governmental structure, of which a great number was arrested on political grounds. This meant that in 1952, out of the 228 top party officials as well as governmental actors and business managers in Abkhazia, 80% were ethnic Georgian, leaving only 34 Abkhaz and 10 other nationalities in power (Shenfield, 2010). During this period, the Abkhaz language became severely repressed as well by the closing of Abkhaz schools and media control.

After Stalin's death, the repression was slightly lifted, and Abkhazia's cultural development was stimulated. The repression by Georgians during the Stalin era of the Soviet Union would prove to be an important factor in the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict that (re-)emerged during the 1980's and 1990's (Shenfield, 2010).

Moving towards the end of the Soviet Union, Georgia regained its independence from the Soviet Union on May 26, 1991 after a referendum held on March 31, 1991. During the short reign of elected president Gamsakhurdia he promised to re-establish full control over the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This was shortly followed by a *coup d'état* as well as a rise of conflict in these breakaway regions.

Numerous causes can be named for the conflict that would reach a new high between 1992 and 1993. Georgia claims authority over Abkhazia, using the decree by Stalin from 1931 as legitimacy, and Abkhazia argues to have ethnical and historical differences from Georgia, hence its claim on independence (Kvarchelia 1996, 18).

On 14 August 1992, a war between the Georgian forces and the Abkhaz separatists started, following the proclamation of independence by the Abkhaz government on July 23rd. The Abkhaz separatists were backed by Russian minorities in the Caucasus such as Chechens and Cossacks after the Georgian troops entered Abkhazia. Within this conflict, numerous war crimes were committed by both sides. The CSCE even ‘expressed their deep concern over “ethnic cleansing”, the massive expulsion of people, predominantly Georgian, from their living areas and the deaths of large numbers of innocent civilians’ (CSCE 1994, 7).

There are no exact numbers available, but the Committee on Human Rights and Interethnic Relations of the Georgian government and the Committee for Human Rights of Abkhazia argue there were 4000 Georgians killed, 10,000 wounded and a 1000 missing as well as 4040 Abkhazians killed (of which 1820 civilians), 8000 wounded and 122 missing (Human Rights Watch, 1995).

According to the Abkhazian authorities, the sovereign Republic of Abkhazia was formed after this war in 1993. This was followed by the adoption of the new constitution as well as the appointment of the first president, Vladislav Ardzynba, on November 26, 1994. After a referendum in 1999, the Act on State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia was finally adopted on October 12 of that same year (President of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2015). This referendum had 87,6% of its eligible population vote, which had 97,7% vote in favour of this new constitution which would adopt the Act on State Independence.

The Abkhazians claim that Georgia violated the agreed cease-fire on multiple occasions after the war in 92/93. In 2008, the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia came to a new high

with a second war. In this war, the Abkhazians got full support from the Russian government and with combined forces, the Georgian troops were removed from Abkhazia. On August 15-16, a cease fire was signed between Russia and Georgia, formally ending the war (President of Abkhazia, 2015).

In 2008, Abkhazia got officially recognised as a sovereign country by the President of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev. Currently, the Georgian government refers to Abkhazia as the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, although it still claims it is ‘the legitimate integral part of Georgia’ (Government of Georgia, 2014). Abkhazia itself uses the same terminology to describe its statehood. However, it does also claim to be independent from Georgia (Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, 2017a). It is an interesting observation that both parties call Abkhazia an autonomous region. Although this has no direct implications, it can make one wonder how the independence of Abkhazia would add to its existence.

2.2 Montevideo criteria applied on Abkhazia

Although Georgia officially considers Abkhazia as a territory occupied by Russian military since the passing of a resolution on August 28, 2008, Abkhazia claims to be independent and wishes to be recognised as such (Civil Georgia, 2008). To be recognized, a new state needs to provide proof to other states that they are dealing with a factual state, rather than a theoretical one. This can be done by looking at the four criteria of statehood as stated in the Montevideo convention. Looking further into these criteria, it shows that these are not as defined as it appears. Firstly, a permanent population implies that a state is more than a government or a territory, but also a collective group of individuals (Zadeh 2012, 22). This permanent population does not specify an amount, but only states that there should be a population at any given moment.

Secondly, the defined territory implies that a state needs a defined territory to be a state. Border disputes do not interfere with the existence of a state. Although it means that the territory of a state is not defined, it should be interpreted that a territory does not need precise borders but needs general borders which may vary (Zadeh 2012, 19-20).

Thirdly, there must be a government. This government should be 'capable of exercising independent and effective authority over the population and the territory' (Zadeh 2012, 23). In some cases, it can be hard to define whether a government is capable of exercising this authority or whether it fails to do so.

Finally, a state needs the capacity to enter relations with the other states. This can be interpreted in many ways which can include foreign investment, trade, aid and dialogue. Some scholars might argue this is not a requirement to gain statehood, but rather the result of gaining statehood (Zadeh 2012, 32).

If Abkhazia would inherently adhere to these criteria of statehood, one could argue that in accordance with the declaratory theory of state as presented in chapter 1, Abkhazia can be seen as a legit state.

2.2.1 Permanent population

Looking at the first one, a permanent population, Abkhazia does have a clear demographic structure and a permanent population. During a 2011 census held by the Office of Government Statistics, the total population of Abkhazia is 240,705 (AbkhazWorld, 2011), these data are also presented by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). The demographic breakdown of nationalities shows that out of the 240,705 inhabitants, 122,069 are Abkhazians, 22,077 Russians, 41,864 Armenians, 43,166 Georgians, 3201 Megrelians/Mingrelians and 1380 Greeks. All nationalities combined add up to 91 different nationalities (Civil Georgia, 2008b).

Neither the United Nations (UN) nor the World Factbook by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report on the population of Abkhazia since neither recognise it as an independent country. Nonetheless, it is safe to assume that Abkhazia does indeed have a permanent population, and thus fulfils the first criterion of statehood according to the Montevideo convention.

2.2.2 Defined territory

Secondly, the Montevideo convention states that a state should have a defined territory. As previously stated, due to border conflicts, a defined territory does not need to have defined borders to be recognised as such. However, on the territory of Abkhazia, all parties can agree. The Abkhazian governmental website as well as the UNPO and the Georgian governmental website state that the territory of Abkhazia is roughly 8700km² which would make up a total of 12,5% of the entire Georgian territory with Abkhazia included (Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, 2017b), (UNPO, 2015), (Government of Georgia, 2014).

The reason that all parties can agree on the territory is that although Georgia does not recognise Abkhazia as independent, it still recognises Abkhazia as a region within Georgia which has a Georgian defined territory. This territory corresponds to the territory as defined by the Abkhaz government.

2.2.3 Government

Thirdly, a government is needed as stated by the criteria listed in the Montevideo convention. When looking at this criterion, the government should be functional in all forms, being able to rule over the territory and population. The government of Abkhazia currently consists of the President (Raul Khajimba), Vice President (Vitali Gabnia), Prime Minister (Artur Mikvabia), First Vice Premier (Shamil Adzynba), Vice Premier (Dmitri Serikov), Chief

of Cabinet Staff (Diana Pilia): a total of 14 ministers and 7 chairmen of state committees (Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, 2017b).

This shows quite an extensive government, theoretically capable of ruling all aspects of governance in Abkhazia. There have currently been several elections of which the previous presidential elections took place in 2009, 2011 and 2014. The election in 2014 was observed by the UNPO during an Election Observation Mission (EOM) of which the results were presented to the European Parliament.

Mainly, the UNPO reported that the elections were ‘largely conducted in an organised, peaceful and transparent manner and conformed the international democratic standards’ (UNPO, 2014). This shows that the government of Abkhazia is arguably democratically elected and controls its population and territory in a democratic way. The effectiveness of this government, however, is up for debate.

Nonetheless, it is imperative to note that Abkhazia does have a governmental structure similar to other, recognised, states. Its president is elected for a five-year term and the power is divided among a legislative power (People’s Assembly), executive power (president) and the judicial power (supreme court and lesser courts). This is all written down in the Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia, adopted by the Supreme Council of the Republic of Abkhazia on November 26, 1994.

2.2.4 Capability to engage in relations with other states

The final criterion of statehood according to the Montevideo convention is that a state should be capable to enter in relations with other states. In theory, the Abkhazian constitution enables Abkhazia to engage in international relations with other states. This is set in articles 47 (8) and 53 (4) of the Abkhazian constitution. Article 47 (8) states that the Parliament of the Republic of Abkhazia will ‘ratify and denounce the interstate treaties and agreements of the

Republic of Abkhazia' (Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2008). Article 53 (4) enables the President of Abkhazia to 'sign international instruments and interstate treaties' (Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2008).

Furthermore, Abkhazia engages in international relations on a practical level as well. First of all, the foreign ministry of Abkhazia has two embassies, several consulates, plenipotentiary representatives and representatives of the ministry around the world. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2017).

This shows that, although only recognised by three states, Abkhazia has a more extensive network of its foreign ministry in other states which do not recognise Abkhazia as an independent, sovereign country. It should be noted, however, that although these consulates and plenipotentiary representatives are present in other states, this does not necessarily imply these states view these institutions as a part of a state, nor that they treat them as such.

Secondly, an important pillar of foreign relations is trade. An article by ApsnyPress (Abkhazia's state press agency) has stated that in 2012, 82% of Abkhazia's trade balance was with Russia (64%) and Turkey (18%). The remaining 18% can be subdivided in Baltic Countries (5%), Moldova (2%), Germany (2%), Ukraine (1%), China (1%) and Other (7%). Exports from Abkhazia only go to Russia (64%) and Turkey (36%) (ApsnyPress, 2012). There are no exact figures available for the import.

These four criteria show that Abkhazia can be argued to be a state, according to the declaratory theory of state when accepting the Montevideo criteria as the basis for statehood. Furthermore, by adhering to these criteria of the Montevideo Convention, it similarly adheres to the concept of state as defined by Max Weber.

Nonetheless, Abkhazia does not get widely recognised as a state. Thus far, Abkhazia gets recognised by four countries: Russia (Solovyev, 2008), Nicaragua (President of Nicaragua, 2008), Venezuela (BBC, 2009) and Nauru (Reuters, 2009) as well as four other non-recognised

countries: South Ossetia, Transnistria, Republic of Artsakh and Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

2.3 Abkhazia as a puppet state

If one would accept that Abkhazia is, or can be, a state that is independent from Georgia, it can still be seen as highly dependent on Russia. Therefore, Abkhazia can be seen as a puppet state. In the case of viewing Abkhazia as a puppet state, Russia fulfils the role as “patron state” by fully supporting as well as recognising the independence of the breakaway region. There are multiple ways a “patron state” can support a de facto state. This can be done by providing currency, passports or more specifically for Abkhazia, security and state budget (Caspersen 2009, 50). A “patron state” does not make up for international recognition.

Although this does provide security for Abkhazia, it limits its potential in the international community and its potential to develop in a fully independent state. For other states this can be considered beneficial to reduce the influence of Russia in the Caucasus. Recognizing Abkhazia as an independent state may be complicated due to the non-recognition policy of Georgia towards the breakaway region but engaging politically and economically with the region might prove to be possible. If this engagement will stay behind, it will put Abkhazia in a position where it must choose between Moscow and Tbilisi. Given past events, it will be unlikely that Abkhazia will turn back to Tbilisi, resulting in a more thorough relationship with Moscow (Cooley & Mitchell 2010, 66).

2.4 Benefits of state recognition for Abkhazia

After the second World War, the number of states increased rapidly, from 64 states in 1945 to almost 200 in 2014 (Fazal and Griffiths 2014, 79). The majority of this increase can be attributed to decolonisation. When looking at this decolonisation, it became apparent that it was

a rarity that a colony would be let go without there being a secessionist movement in the colony. This implies that there was a longing for independence. Since a lot has changed since the mass-decolonisation and Abkhazia is not a colony, not all motives are similar, but some remain the same. As shown, Abkhazia is aiming towards full independence. The constitutive theory of state claims that a state can only be a state if it is recognised by other states. Therefore, being recognised would imply *being* a state in accordance with this theory. In 2009, Putin stated that although only a few countries recognise Abkhazia, it was only needed that Russia would recognise it in order to continue the peacekeeping efforts in the region (Putin, 2009). This section will look at the benefits for Abkhazia of being recognised as a state.

2.4.1. Emotional value and passports

The *feeling* of being recognised can be perceived as a valid reason to strive for state recognition, albeit not very academic nor measurable. This feeling of being recognised can however be linked to nationalism. In the case of nationalism, an important factor of being recognised is having the nationality being recognized. This, in turn, can be linked to *de jure* citizenship. When someone is considered a citizen of a country, one can obtain a passport for this specific nationality. Since 2006, it is possible for Abkhazians to obtain an Abkhazian passport. This passport, however, does not get recognised by the majority of countries, similar to the Abkhazian nationality. Because of this, Abkhazians cannot travel abroad on an Abkhazian passport, aside from traveling to the four states that do recognise Abkhazia. A solution for this would be to obtain either a Georgian or Russian passport.

In the 1990s, it was not allowed to distribute Georgian passports in Abkhazia, nor was it possible to gain an Abkhazian passport. Since this resulted in the disability to travel, Russia stepped in and provided Russian passports to citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Mühlfried 2010, 9). This has proven to be an argument for Russia to aid its citizens in Abkhazia in the

fight to gain independence from Georgia in 2008. In 2002, 150.000 Abkhazians obtained a Russian passport (Mackinnon, 2002). By awarding Russian passports to 150.000 Abkhazians, these people became more dependent on Russia. In case Abkhazia would decide to move away from Russia, these passports could be revoked, removing the ability to travel abroad and gain certain benefits related to e.g. pension in Russia.

2.4.2. Membership to international organizations

A more practical motive for wanting state recognition is the possibility to gain membership to certain organisations. The most important organisation that would, at least, require statehood as a condition for membership is the United Nations. Being a membership of the United Nations can be helpful to a state in multiple ways. These benefits can be attributed to the major objectives or purposes of the UN as cited in Article 1 of the UN-Charter. The purposes of the UN are ‘to maintain international peace and security ... to develop friendly relations among nations ... to achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character ... [and] to be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends’ (UN-Charter, 1945).

When individually looking at these purposes, Abkhazia would benefit a lot from UN membership, based on these objectives alone. Currently, the conflict in Abkhazia has cooled down, but chances are a new conflict could arise. Being a UN member would greatly improve the security of the state. Although Abkhazia does attempt to improve relations with other states, these efforts have not been very fruitful. Being recognised as a state, and even further, gaining, UN membership could positively influence the relations between Abkhazia and other states. However, it should be noted that being a state or being recognised as one, does not automatically result in admission to the UN.

Aside from the main objectives of the UN, the UN has multiple organs that could benefit Abkhazia or any member state as such. Several UN programmes have been and are present and active in Abkhazia. Most of these are active in the economy, healthcare and education of Abkhazia. During a meeting in February 2017, the start of UN Women in Abkhazia was discussed and should start in the near future (Apsnypress, 2017).

Although these UN programmes are active in Abkhazia, some specific specialised agencies have statehood as a requirement for a state to be eligible for aid. The most important ones are the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to gain loans. These forms of aid could provide a new state, such as Abkhazia in case of recognition, to further develop its economy and create financial independence (Fazal and Griffiths 2014, 80).

Another international organisation that could provide significant help to Abkhazia is the European Union. No member state of the EU recognises Abkhazia as an independent state. But, in the (theoretical) case of Abkhazia being recognised by the entire European Union, this could prove to be very beneficial for Abkhazia. The ultimate goal could be EU membership. Nonetheless, this is not required for benefiting from being recognised as a state by the EU.

One of the benefits of being recognised by the EU would be eligibility to join the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which is in turn part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). As the European External Action Service (EEAS) explains, the EaP 'aims at building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation' (EEAS, April 2016). This would have multiple effects on Abkhazia.

Firstly, this would greatly improve relations with the other EU members as well as the EU in general as an institution, providing a big market and possibilities for trade and other interaction. Secondly, Abkhazia could specifically improve relations with the EU through an Association Agreement and joining Deep and Comprehensive Trade Areas. This could be seen as a first step towards economic and political integration. Not only does this imply better

chances for Abkhazia on a global or regional scale, but it also reduces the dependence on Russia.

2.4.3. Bilateral and multilateral benefits

Up until now, the importance of international organisations has been stressed. Aside from international organisations, being recognised as a state also provides opportunities for multilateral or bilateral financial aid (Fazal and Griffiths 2014, 94). In the case of Abkhazia, the event of recognising Abkhazia would already be a signal towards Georgia. Nonetheless, in theory, it is easier for a state to engage in bilateral aid when the other party is being recognised as a state as well. This can in turn be related to the concept of free markets. For Abkhazia, it would be less difficult to join the market when it is recognised (Fazal and Griffiths 2014, 94-95). As an example of a bilateral benefit of state recognition is that recognition has postal value as well. When a state gets recognised, the postal value enables states to mail goods or correspondence directly to this specific state, hence creating possibilities for bilateral interaction and trade (Fazal and Griffiths 2014, 94). Obtaining this postal benefit, positively affects the possibility of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and increases the economic chances for a non-recognised state.

2.4.4. Benefits of partial recognition

Partial recognition also has certain benefits. For example, it would allow Abkhazians to travel with Abkhaz documents. Although accepting an official symbol of a country can be very sensitive, especially for Georgia, it is not a new phenomenon. Both the United States as well as the United Kingdom allow visa and travel applications from the Turkish Northern Republic of Cyprus, even though this Republic only gets recognised by Turkey (Cooley & Mitchell 2010,

67). Furthermore, although Georgian embargo's might encumber possible trade with Abkhazia, it could be worth trying to engage in trade with Abkhazia as a third party.

Currently, as argued, Abkhazia can be seen as a puppet state from Russia. A possible reason why this would not be sufficient and full independence is desired, can be found in the limitations that puppet states have. Since Abkhazia has lost its (economic) dependency on Georgia, it has gained dependency on Russia. This stands in the way of developing fully as an independent country. Although having Russia as a patron state or being recognised as a *de facto* state does have its benefits, it cannot account for the benefits an independent state would have such as membership of the UN or receiving aid from several international organisations.

2.4.5. Costs of state recognition

Aside from benefits, three costs of statehood can be identified as well. These costs can be identified as such that a new state needs a viable judicial and financial system, will lose all benefits of being included in the current state, and any humanitarian aid could possibly leave the area (Fazal and Griffiths 2014, 96). In the case of Abkhazia, it has been shown that these financial and judicial systems are already in place and that Abkhazia currently possesses semi-autonomy in Georgia. This implies that it does not benefit from the Georgian state. This would only leave a third of the "cost" for Abkhazia to bear, but this might be insignificant compared to the possible gains of statehood.

2.4.6. Benefits for a recognizing state

As shown, there are many benefits to being recognised. However, the act of recognising a state needs to be beneficial to the recognising state as well. Without an incentive, recognition is unlikely. Furthermore, these benefits would need to outweigh the possible losses of

recognising a new state, i.e. trading with the origin state. Several reasons to recognise a state can be identified, of which some can be related to the benefits for the recognised state.

First of all, the recognised state could more easily trade with the recognising state. This could also result in trade benefits or contracts to benefit both parties. Secondly, agreements can be made on e.g. mining resources in the recognised country. In general, preferential treatment can be agreed upon in return for recognition. This could be economical as well as political. If the recognised state has a lot of resources available, this could be an incentive to recognise it and gain beneficial trade or mining agreements on these resources.

2.4.7. Recognition strategies of Abkhazia

Abkhazia has engaged in multiple strategies in order to gain recognition. The most visible strategy is appealing to the shared history and culture with other states. In 2014, the speaker of the Abkhaz government, Valeri Bganbga, wrote a letter to the presidents of Belarus and Kazakhstan to gain recognition. He stressed that during Soviet times, the contact was present in multiple forms. Furthermore, the shared historical relations would provide a good foundation for recognising Abkhazia as independent (GHN, 2014). Although neither Belarus nor Kazakhstan recognise the independence of Abkhazia, its citizens have a special opportunity to enter Abkhazia. These visitors do not need a visa if they enter Abkhazia for 'tourist or business purposes for a period not exceeding two weeks' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2018a).

2.5 Conclusion

When looking at the Montevideo criteria, Abkhazia has a permanent population which has been certified in a census in 2011. Its territory can be agreed upon by both Abkhazia and Georgia, although the parties do not agree on its independence. The government of Abkhazia

is extensive and set in the Abkhazian constitution. Although perceived to be democratic, its functionality can be questioned. In the constitution, the possibility to engage with other states is established. Furthermore, with the consulates and embassies of Abkhazia abroad and the trade with other states, it can be argued that Abkhazia is capable of engaging in relations with other states. It should be noted, however, that this can be a one-way relation. Taking these four criteria into account, one could argue that Abkhazia has the necessities for statehood.

There are multiple benefits to being recognised. First of all, aside from the feeling of being recognised, being recognised as a state would also result in the recognition of the Abkhazian nationality. That would provide the possibility to travel abroad, using an Abkhazian passport. Furthermore, this would reduce the dependence on Russia and Russian passports. Secondly, being recognised as a state could open doors to certain international organisations. The most important would be the United Nations, the possibility for loans from the IMF and World Bank and the possibility to improve the relation with the European Union. Thirdly, bilateral and multilateral relationships could greatly improve by being recognised as a state since this would facilitate access to the global market. There are costs to statehood such as losing benefits from being a part of a state, however, these can be neglected due to the current independence of Abkhazia from Georgia.

Finally, the strategies of Abkhazia to appeal for recognition are often related to the cultural and historical similarities with other states. The main focus of Abkhazian foreign policy lies with Kazakhstan and Belarus whereas they perceive these countries to be the most likely to recognise the Abkhazian independence. Kazakhstan and Belarus therefore receive special visa treatments.

Chapter 3: International responses to the self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia

As stressed in the introduction, the majority of the debate around Abkhazia and its (potential) independence focusses on the main players. These players besides Georgia and Abkhazia are the European Union and Russia. Whereas these two major powers can certainly be perceived as the most influential powers in this debate, there are more states to take into consideration. This chapter will focus on the international response concerning the self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia. First, the current international recognition of Abkhazia will be discussed, followed by the motives of Russia to recognise Abkhazia and the motives of the EU not to recognise it. Furthermore, the shared neighbourhood of the EU and Russia will be discussed as well as their position towards Abkhazia and its self-proclaimed independence.

3.1 International Recognition of Abkhazia

The recognition of Abkhazia was first blocked by Resolution 1808 by the United Nations Security Council in 2008. This resolution extended the observation mission in Georgia and reaffirmed ‘the commitment of all Member States to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders’ (United Nations, 2008). Later, Abkhazia got recognised by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru nonetheless. The latter three states recognized Abkhazia for a variety of reasons. Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia will be elaborated upon in the next section.

As previously stated, Abkhazia does arguably adhere to the four criteria of statehood according to the Montevideo Convention which would argue it to be a state following the declaratory theory of state. The constitutive theory of state, on the other hand, could argue against Abkhazia being a state because it lacks general recognition. Opinions may vary, since

four UN-member states do recognise the independence of Abkhazia which can be argued to be enough to be seen as a state in accordance with the declaratory theory of state. The UN does not hold criteria for how many states need to recognize a state for it to be fully accepted to be a state. For state recognition however, in its core principle, the UN adheres to the Montevideo criteria.

The decision of Russia to recognise Abkhazia as an independent state was met with general disapproval. The main argument provided against the recognition of Abkhazia is that 'such recognition presents a breach of international law, namely, the violation of the territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised border' (Chirikba 2009, 1).

One of the main arguments by Russia that followed was that such violation of the territorial integrity did not withheld states from recognising Kosovo earlier that year and thereby violating the territorial integrity of Serbia. As a defence against this accusation, these states replied that the case of Kosovo is unique and cannot, nor should, be seen as a precedent of Abkhazia (Chirikba 2009, 1).

When taking this argument of the territorial integrity of a state into account, it could be noted that therefore the emergence of a new state is impossible in the modern world since it would always violate existing borders. In order to check the legality of the independence of Abkhazia, Chirikba used six questions to put Abkhazia's independence in a legal perspective. These questions include '(1) Did Abkhazia have a history of statehood before it became a part of the Georgian SSR? ... (2) Was Abkhazia a state during the Soviet period? ... (3) Did the Abkhazian ASSR have the right of secession from the Georgian SSR? ... (4) Did Abkhazia have any legal inter-relations with Georgia in the post-Soviet period prior to its recognition? ... (5) Did Abkhazia manage to establish itself as an independent polity before its recognition? ... [and] (6) Does Abkhazia meet internationally accepted criteria for qualification as a State?' (Chirikba 2009, 1-3). Some of these questions such as 'Did the Abkhazian ASSR have the right

of secession from the Georgian SSR?’ will receive a different answer, depending on which side of the conflict in Georgia will provide the answer.

The conclusion is that Abkhazia has an extensive history of being a state although this was not always an *independent* state, prior to its incorporation in the Georgian SSR. When looking at international law, it can be argued that between its independence from the Georgia in 1993 and its recognition by Russia in 2008, Abkhazia was self-governed and met the criteria for statehood as mentioned in the Montevideo convention (Chirikba 2009, 11-12). When relating back to the argument of the violation of the territorial integrity of Georgia, two arguments are provided to support the claim that this was in fact not a breach of international law. These arguments are that both wars in 1992-1993 and 2008 were the results of the Georgian oppressive policy towards Abkhazia and that Georgia held no control over the region any longer (Chirikba 2009, 11-12). By disproving the argument of international law, some scholars believe that it is not international law, but rather (geo)political arguments that withhold states from recognising Abkhazia.

This raises the question what could happen if other states decided to recognise Abkhazia as an independent state. The most important actor in this case would be the European Union. In 2008, the European Union deployed a Monitoring Mission in Georgia to aid in resolving the conflict. In the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2015, the EU reconfirmed its dedication to the relationship with Georgia. This relationship resulted in the EU-Georgia Association Agreement in July 2016 (European External Action Service, 2017). The relationship between the European states and Georgia can be an important incentive not to recognise Abkhazia.

The fear of losing the support of Georgia in the Southern Caucasus can be a reason why the EU Member States do not recognise Abkhazia (Clamadieu, 2017). Although not recognising Abkhazia could be more beneficial towards the EU-Georgia relation, it could also mean that

the only viable partner for Abkhazia would be Russia. This could result in a stronger position of Russia within the Southern Caucasus. Nonetheless, the European Union could not decide to recognise Abkhazia as long as Georgia holds its non-recognition stance towards Abkhazia since its relationship with Georgia is perceived to be more valuable. Furthermore, recognising Abkhazia could be used as a precedent for other de-facto states within the region as well as outside the region to claim independence and use Abkhazia as an example to justify their independence.

Lastly, although it is argued that there is no legal ground for not recognising Abkhazia, it can also be argued that there is no legal ground for recognising Abkhazia either, giving it an exceptional status in international law. The “rights of peoples to self-determination” is applicable on cases with a colonial history and there is no right of secession in international law, making it hard to find legal ground to recognise Abkhazia as an independent state (Clamadiou, 2017).

3.2 Motives of Russia and the EU concerning the recognition of Abkhazia

As previously stated, the two major players within this situation are the Russian Federation and the EU. This section will elaborate on the reasons provided by Russia to recognise Abkhazia, and the reasons provided by the EU not to recognise it.

Since the Russian decision to – suddenly – recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia, former president Medvedev gave a statement on August 26, 2008 on this exact question. The main reason for Russia to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia was the attack by the Georgian government on Tskhinvali. During this attack, many people perished. This included several Russian peacekeepers. The attack on Tskhinvali was perceived by Russia as an attempted Genocide. As a result, Russia believed that a peaceful solution would no longer be possible and decided to interfere (Medvedev, 2008).

It is argued that Medvedev did not provide a solid argument on why to recognise (especially) Abkhazia, since there was no attack on Abkhazia. Furthermore, it was striking that after so many years of conflict, Russia decided only now to interfere. This implies that purely being attacked might harm the right of self-determination but that does not mean that it should lead to secession (Samkharadze 163, 2016).

Another argument given by the Russian officials is related to the recognition of the independence of Kosovo. Kosovo is often mentioned when discussing Abkhazia since some people argue it is a rather similar case, yet others argue the complete opposite. Whether the cases of Abkhazia and Kosovo are similar is not relevant for this thesis.

In a statement by Putin on January 2006, prior to the recognition of Abkhazia, he said that if Kosovo would be granted independence, he would not see a valid reason not to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Samkharadze 163, 2016). Several statements followed in the years prior to the recognition of both Kosovo and later Abkhazia and these statements would often refer to the same idea of precedence in case Kosovo would be recognised as independent.

The possible recognition of Abkhazia by the European Union was discussed on September 1, 2008 by the Extraordinary European Council in Brussels. In the second point from the conclusion that was sent to the delegations, it is stressed that the European Council ‘strongly condemns Russia’s unilateral decision to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia’ (European Council, 2008). Furthermore, it called upon the Member States of the EU not to recognise this independence.

The decision by the European Council is based upon several principles in international law. As quoted ‘It [the European Council] recalls that a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflict in Georgia must be based on full respect for the principles of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity recognised by international law, the Final Act of the Helsinki

Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and United Nations Security Council resolutions' (European Council, 2008).

3.3 The Shared Neighbourhood

As previously mentioned, the majority of the literature about the Georgian Abkhazian conflict as well as the fight for independence of Abkhazia focuses on the two bigger players in this game, which are the European Union and Russia. Russia being the actor that actively supports the independence of Abkhazia on the one side and the European Union that actively supports the Georgian territorial integrity on the other side. Aside from these two big players, there are multiple smaller players which are important as well. These smaller players in the case of this thesis are both geographically as well as politically in between the two big players. To narrow it down, I have chosen to look at the former Soviet states in the shared neighbourhood of the European Union and Russia. These states are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Naturally, Georgia will be omitted for obvious reasons. This leaves five countries with an approach towards Georgia, Abkhazia and the conflict in general. None of these countries officially recognise Abkhazia. In this following section, the position of these states will be elaborated upon.

3.3.1 Armenia

According to the 2011 census, the third largest ethnicity in Abkhazia is Armenian with 17,39%, right after Georgian and, of course, Abkhaz. This implies that in 2011, around 42.000 Armenians were living in Abkhazia (AbkhazWorld, 2011). The president of Armenia, Serzh Sarkisian, has made a statement in 2008 that Armenia will not recognise Abkhazia. He does state that he supports the right of self-determination of Abkhazians. The main reason provided for this decision is that Armenia cannot recognise Abkhazia for the same reason it cannot

recognise Nagorno-Karabakh nor Kosovo (UNPO, 2008). Furthermore, it is a political game for Armenia to play.

Recognising Abkhazia would worsen the relationship with Georgia. This could prove to be disastrous for the economy of Armenia since its trade is already blocked by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Georgia's importance to Armenia can be found in the accessibility of Armenia. The Russian gas reaches Armenia via a pipeline that runs through Georgia. Furthermore, as a landlocked country, Armenia is reliant on the ports in both Poti and Batumi in Georgia which process roughly 90% of the import and export of Armenia by sea (Armenia Liberty, 2008). By taking these facts into consideration, Armenian recognition of Abkhazia does not seem likely to happen.

3.3.2 Azerbaijan

In 2008, the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Khazar Ibrahim, stated in a speech that 'Azerbaijan's position remains unchanged. We recognise Georgia's territorial integrity' (Today.az, 2008). Azerbaijan has a similar *de facto* region, Nagorno-Karabakh, which is *de facto* ruled by the Republic of Artsakh which proclaimed independence in 1991. Although Azerbaijan does not exercise any power over this region, they refuse to acknowledge it. This results in a strong opposition against the possible independence of Abkhazia. In 2007, prior to the recognition of Abkhazia by Russia, Venezuela and Nicaragua, the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, held a speech at the opening of the GUAM Baku Summit. This speech also focused on breakaway regions. Aliyev mentioned Abkhazia and stated that the world community 'will never recognise criminal regimes in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Dnestr region and Daghlig Garabagh' (Aliyev, 2007).

Aside from respecting the territorial integrity of Georgia, Azerbaijan claims that the independence of Abkhazia is against the international law. During a joint meeting of the

Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey in 2016, it was stressed that a peaceful solution should be sought for the conflicts with the *de facto* states due to their illegitimate existence in accordance with international law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, 2016). Furthermore, the relation between Azerbaijan and Georgia has been improving in the past few years with an important similarity between the countries which are the breakaway regions.

In March 2016, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Elmar Mammadyarov, and Georgia, Mikheil Janelidze, gave a joint press conference in which both parties stressed the importance of supporting and recognising each other's territorial integrity. Mammadyarov once more stressed that 'this conflict must be settled based on the principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and inviolability of internationally recognised borders' (Mammadyarov, 2016). Naturally, following the 2017 parliamentary elections in Abkhazia, an official statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan stated that Azerbaijan does not recognise the elections nor its results (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, 2017).

3.3.3 Republic of Moldova

Similar to Azerbaijan, Moldova faces its own breakaway region, Transnistria. In an official statement from the Moldovan government, it expressed its opinion on the breakaway regions of Georgia; 'The government of Moldova does not think at this moment that international recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will become a factor stabilising the situation' (Reuters, 2008). Here, Moldova uses the argument that recognition will not stabilise the region nor will result in peace. This was further elaborated upon during the 63rd general assembly of the United Nations in 2008. In the speech, the former Minister for Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova, Andrei Stratan, stated that settling a dispute with force is not beneficial and that recognising Abkhazia would not benefit the situation in the region.

During this speech he also mentioned the argument of international law for not recognising Abkhazia. Only the 'Helsinki Final Act, the United Nations Charter and all current principles of international law' would guide the Moldovan Government's decision on such cases (Stratan, 2008). Aside from the arguments of international law and stabilising the region, the region of Transnistria provides an important reason not to recognise Abkhazia. By recognizing Abkhazia, it would be tough for Moldova to hold on to its position towards Transnistria as a non-recognised region in Moldova.

3.3.4 Ukraine

Ukraine does not recognise Abkhazia, which can be attributed to several causes. Currently, Ukraine faces breakaway regions in the east and it has supposedly lost Crimea after the 2014 annexation by Russia. Denying the recognition of Abkhazia has been mentioned often in Ukraine. In 2008, former president Yushchenko stressed the importance of the territorial integrity of Georgia and that acknowledging Abkhazia would be a violation of the Georgian territory as well as international law (Yushchenko, 2008). In 2010, the former president of Ukraine Yanukovich stated that Ukraine would still not acknowledge the independence of Abkhazia. This time, a slightly softer approach was taken, stressing the importance of international law and the fact that it would not solve a (frozen) conflict. With this move, Yanukovich, whom is often perceived to be pro-Russian, was believed to let down Russia (Yanukovich, 2010).

The latest comments about Abkhazia from Ukraine are made by Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Pavlo Klimkin who has repeatedly spoken about not letting the Donbass conflict escalate and follow the Abkhazia scenario (Klimkin, 2017). Again, international law and the territorial integrity of Georgia appear to be the main causes for not recognising Abkhazia. Currently, another argument might be more pressing. Since Russia supports the independence

of Abkhazia, this could be seen as a reason for Ukraine to decide against it. This can be traced back to the Russian interference in the Donbass region as well as Crimea which resulted in significantly damaged relations between Ukraine and Russia.

Another reason is more historic. During the 1992 war in Abkhazia, Ukrainian volunteers gathered and fought on the Georgian side of the conflict which shows strong ties between the two countries. This could result in the consideration of losing Georgia in the process of recognising Abkhazia, which would not be beneficial for either party.

3.3.5 Belarus

Of all countries mentioned, Belarus is the odd one out. First of all, Belarus is not as dependent on Georgia as Armenia, nor does it have a breakaway region like Azerbaijan, Ukraine or Moldova. Secondly, of these countries, Belarus has the closest ties with Russia. Thirdly, the stance towards Abkhazian independence has changed over the years.

Belarus and Abkhazia do not have an important shared history that goes back a long way. With the emergence of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia and Belarus became part of a single Union. It was not until 1996 that Belarus and Abkhazia really engaged in bilateral relations. In 1996, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) imposed economic sanctions against Abkhazia. This was signed by ten states, including the Russian Federation, but excluding Belarus (Civil Georgia, 2008a). Up until this day, this holds a lot of meaning to the Abkhaz population and government.

Proceeding to the recognition of Abkhazia by Russia, in September 2008, president Alexander Lukashenko has given an interview in which he addresses Abkhazia. The question from Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung aims at why Belarus had not immediately recognised Abkhazia's independence in spite of their close ally, Russia, doing so. When answering the question, Lukashenko said that Belarus has close ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on a

personal, political and economic level. As for why it has not been recognised yet, Lukashenko said that he wanted the new parliament to have a say since it was a rather acute situation following two decades of conflict (Lukashenko, 2008). Waiting for the results of the parliamentary elections of 2008 is seen by some as stalling. By not deciding whether to recognise Abkhazia or not, Belarus gave time to both sides of the “conflict” to approach Belarus. In this case, these sides are not represented by Georgia and Abkhazia, but by the two big players in the scenario, the European Union and Russia. Waiting to decide can be perceived as waiting for the best offer from either side. In short, the consideration between Russia and the EU is that Belarus feels like an inferior partner to Russia on the one side, and closer political and economic ties with the EU on the other side (Stratfor Worldview, 2008).

In February 2009, the EU made a move. It stated that, in case Belarus would recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, it may lose support. The following month, Lukashenko met with Sergey Bagapash, to whom he referred as the President of Abkhazia. This meeting was to establish further ties with Abkhazia and discuss economic issues with the region. As Lukashenko stated, ‘after all, much work emerges after gaining independence’ (Lukashenko, March 2009). This shows as if Belarus had unofficially recognised the independence of Abkhazia. When asked to explain the visit to Abkhazia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained that the history between Belarus and Abkhazia dates back to before the conflict and that the bilateral relation aims towards several projects on several levels (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, 2009).

In a statement given by Lukashenko in November 2009, he states that Belarus had ‘no other choice but to recognise the independence of Georgia’s breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia’ (Lukashenko, November 2009).

Nonetheless, eventually Belarus decided not to recognise Abkhazia’s independence. This resulted in an improved relation between Belarus and Georgia. The main reason for not

recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia is that Russia would not share the burden that would arise for Belarus. Lukashenko explained that the Belarusian trade with the European Union could receive a massive blow in the case of recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia. When he met with Russian president Medvedev in 2010, he asked Medvedev if Russia would support Belarus in case of these financial consequences, to which Medvedev replied that that was a different issue (Lukashenko, 2010). Here it becomes clear that the Belarusian consideration between East (Russia) and West (EU) is the key to not recognising Abkhazia. By not recognising Abkhazia, Lukashenko clearly chose the West over Russia. The improved relation between Belarus and Georgia is visible in the first official visit of Lukashenko to Georgia on 22-24 April 2015 (Rukhadze, 2015).

3.4 Conclusion

Internationally, Abkhazia gets recognised by four states: Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru. Furthermore, two major players can be identified, namely Russia and the EU. Russia recognises the independence of Abkhazia whereas the EU strongly opposes this independence.

The main reasons for Russia to recognise Abkhazia was the attack of Georgian armed forces in Tskhinvali. In this attack, Russian peacekeepers perished. Furthermore, the recognition of Kosovo can be seen as a reason to recognise Abkhazia, according to Russian officials. For the EU, the main reason for not recognising Abkhazia can be found in international law and treaties. To be specific, the territorial integrity of Georgia, the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference and the UN Security Council resolutions are seen as valid reasons not to recognise Abkhazia as independent according to the EU.

Lastly, it was illustrated that for most countries in the shared neighbourhood of Russia and the EU, a logical explanation why they do not recognise Abkhazia can be provided. This usually ties in with having an own breakaway region or economic dependence on Georgia. Belarus does not have a breakaway region nor is it dependent on Georgia and hence it can be

seen as the odd one out. Because of the position of Belarus, it is an interesting case to look at, which will be done in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Belarus and the independence of Abkhazia

As mentioned before, it is evident that Belarus is different from the other Eastern Partnership countries concerning the position towards Abkhazia in two major ways. It does not have a breakaway region of its own nor does it depend on Georgia. This makes for an interesting case to further elaborate upon. First, the foreign policies of the EU and Russia towards this shared neighbourhood will be elaborated upon. In order to understand the importance of Belarus as a third party between the EU and Russia, the bilateral ties between Belarus – EU and Belarus – Russia will be discussed. This will shape the context of the Belarusian foreign policy with two of its main partners. After this, three time periods in the decision making concerning the recognition of Abkhazia by Belarus will be identified and discussed. These periods will be linked to the three alternative ways to deal with *de facto* states aside from recognising them.

This is followed by an analysis of the decision-making of Belarus concerning the recognition of Abkhazia. For this, the Belarusian position between Russia and the EU on a political level is of great importance as well. Finally, the importance of Abkhazia's argument within the case of its recognition by Belarus will be discussed. This will be followed by a conclusion.

For this chapter, the majority of information, or the lack of it, was found by searching the databases of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of both Belarus and Abkhazia, the website of the Presidency of both Belarus and Abkhazia as well as the news agencies ApsnyPress and BelTA which are the Abkhazian and Belarusian state-owned news agencies. Furthermore, various other news agencies as well as Georgian sources have been consulted. The reason behind these sources is that especially state-owned news agencies and the Ministries of both Belarus and Abkhazia most likely reflect the position of the state in their publications.

4.1 Foreign policy of the EU and Russia on the Shared Neighbourhood

Belarus has, similar to other EaP countries, a geographically interesting position. It is between the European Union on its western border and Russia on its eastern border. This area is called the shared neighbourhood and is of great importance for Belarus.

Due to the rather opposing nature of Russia and the EU, these two parties often clash on different topics. Although being in the middle of such potential conflict does cause some hesitation and fear in some cases, it also offers great benefit if dealt with correctly. First, I will discuss the policy of the EU towards the shared neighbourhood, followed by the Russian policy.

The EU generally had a rather careful approach to the region which was formerly part of the Soviet Union. Due to this fact, as well as having other priorities, the EU did not actively engage with these countries. Whenever the EU started to grow, these countries became closer and eventually bordered the EU. This meant that the EU needed to act in some way to engage with these countries.

Eventually the main goal for the EU was to soften the position of the Neighbourhood countries. As quoted in a report, the main challenge was to make 'their situation less ambivalent and more comfortable' (Löwenhardt 2005, 29). This resulted in bilateral Action Plans between the EU and the individual countries in the Neighbourhood in 2004. Every year, the goals and plans were revised. These Action Plans were later backed up with the Eastern Partnership and in several occasions with Association Agreements.

This approach by the EU to engage with the Neighbourhood might show to be gentle, aimed at mutual benefit. Nevertheless, these plans and agreements are also used as a form of leverage. In the case of Belarus, the EU has imposed sanctions in order to try and alter Belarusian policy, mainly focused on political freedom, freedom of press and the death penalty (Gaidlyte 2010, 42).

The Russian approach to the Neighbourhood and Belarus changed with Putin's presidency. When Putin came to power in Russia, he ended the multilateralism in the Neighbourhood which was left by Yeltsin. The change to bilateral interaction, rather than multilateral, was based on financial prospects and the possibility of the CIS members turning against Russia instead of cooperating. The notion was that bilateral ties would improve integration in the region. This resulted in a more "egocentric" Russia, that focussed on its own interest, rather than the region's. Often, this new strategy did not include hesitation and a timid position towards the neighbourhood such as the EU did.

Since both the EU and Russia are very important parties for Belarus, both hold certain leverages over Belarus. Russian leverage over Belarus comes in the form of supporting Lukashenko, a (monetary) support for the regime in general, loans to support national stabilisation and an important partner as an energy-transit country. On the other hand, the most effective levers from the EU are visa liberalisation, an alternative energy source, a general alternative for Russia, a say in the do's and don'ts of the IMF, and trade (Popescu and Wilson 2009, 49). Although leverage does have a negative connotation, it also provides a view on the benefits from both parties for Belarus. Since both parties are so eager to either keep or gain Belarus on "their side", it puts Belarus in a situation where it can let both parties knock against each other.

To look further into the decision of Belarus to not recognise Abkhazia eventually, it is necessary to take the relation between Belarus, the EU and Russia into account. The main reason for this can be found in the multi-vector approach of the Belarusian foreign policy. This implies that Belarus seeks to create and improve relations and cooperation with all regions. From an International Relations perspective, this fits within realism. Of these regions, the EU, Russia and to a certain extent the USA can be seen as the most important partners to Belarus. For this thesis, the main players to influence the policy of Belarus are the EU and Russia. Currently,

Belarus tries to escape the position of dependency on these other regions and attempts to be treated as an equal party to its relations (Behrends 19, 2016).

4.1.1 Belarus and the EU

In an interview with former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Sergei Martynov in 2009 by Euromoney, Martynov explains that he firmly believes that the situation and issues in the Caucasus and Belarus' position towards this had no relation whatsoever to the participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership (Martynov, 2009a). This is a clear example of the minister separating the situation in the Caucasus from any cooperation between Belarus and the EU.

The Eastern Partnership is a part of the European Neighbourhood Policy focussing on the shared neighbourhood of Russia and the EU. This Partnership 'aims at building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation' (European External Action Service, October 2016) with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Important to note is that it was launched on May 7, 2009 at the Prague Summit, after the recognition of Abkhazia by Russia.

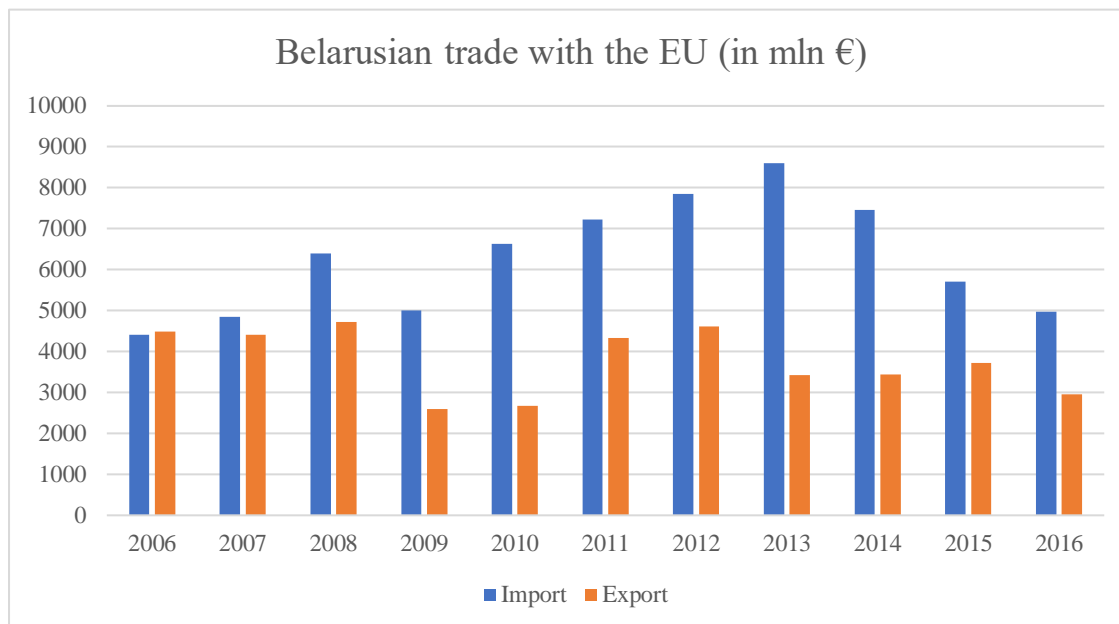
The Partnership is mutually beneficial for both the EU as well as the Partner states. Therefore, it is safe to say that Belarus had to take the development of the relation with the EU into account when deciding about Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The EU has been critical against the Belarusian authorities which often resulted in embargos, sanctions, and bans against Belarus and the Belarusian officials. This has caused a rather troublesome relation at several points in history. Often, these consequences were based on allegations of Belarus not respecting human rights. Between 2008 and 2010, an active dialogue between the two partners took place, which resulted in membership of the EaP. Later, in 2011, a new visa ban against officials from Belarus was put in practice, resulting in the end of the EaP membership of Belarus. At the end of 2012, high official talks were resumed, which

ended in reduced sanctions between 2013 and 2015. This also restored the membership of Belarus as an Eastern Partner (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, *European Union*, nd).

Aside from political cooperation, the EU is the second largest trade partner of Belarus, following Russia (European Commission, 2017). In 2017, the EU had a total share of 26,9% of the export and roughly 20% of the import of Belarusian trade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, 2017). This could as well be an important incentive for Belarus to stall the recognition of Abkhazia. In the graph below, the European Union trade with Belarus is shown.

Graph 1



Source: European Commission, 2017

In this graph, there are two interesting years to look at. Between 2008 and 2009 there has been an overall decline in both import and export. This can most likely be attributed to the financial crisis of 2008. Furthermore, in 2011 and 2012 the relation deteriorated, which is visible in the decline in export. Nonetheless, the import increased till 2013, but decreased between 2013 and 2014.

4.1.2 Belarus and Russia

The relation between Belarus and Russia goes back a long time. Similar to the relation with the European Union, the Belarusian – Russian relations had had its ups and downs. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Belarus and Russia have been neighbouring states. Russia is arguably the most important partner of Belarus. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus states that its partnership is due to the ‘geographic location, close historic and cultural links between our countries and peoples, economic ties and co-operation between the Belarusian and Russian businesses’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, *Russia and Union State*, nd).

During the Soviet Era, the industries were strategically placed throughout the Soviet Union to increase the benefits. When the Soviet Union ceased to exist, these industries were often not beneficial for the independent states due to the heavy imbalance of the industries and hence the economy (Löwenhardt 2005, 20).

This resulted in a high dependence on Russia in the Neighbourhood on which responses from these states differed. Whereas for example Moldova actively attempted to create economic independence, Belarus did not do so actively, and instead worked towards integration with the Union State. The main dependence of Belarus on Russia could be found in the energy supply. This was intertwined with the Belarusian economy to the extent that it was argued that in early 2000 the entire economy and economic model of Belarus ‘depends solely on the continuity of Russian good will and generosity’ (Nutti 2005, 102). This provides leverage to Russia over Belarus.

In 1999 the Union State of Belarus and Russia was launched which provided a basis for the two countries to integrate. This Union State has several goals which include the development of peace, democracy, economy, a legal framework and comprehensive trade area and a shared defence, foreign and social policy. Because of this, Belarus and Russia are often similarly approaching cases.

From 2005 onwards, Belarus also had to pay the standard market price for gas from Russia. This resulted in a deterioration of the relation between the two countries. Ever since, the gas price Belarus had to pay has been an important leverage of Russia over Belarus. Nevertheless, it could also be used as a leverage by Belarus over Russia.

In 2010, the Eurasian Customs Union was initiated by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia were pressured to join this Customs Union. It is argued that this Union was launched to counter the Eastern Partnership by the European Union since it targeted the same countries (Dreyer and Popescu 2014, 1).

Later, this Customs Union gradually evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 after the treaties were signed in 2014. Aside from Russia and Belarus, the other members are Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This Union was based on an integrated market with the free movement of individuals, money, service as well as goods, similarly to the European Union market.

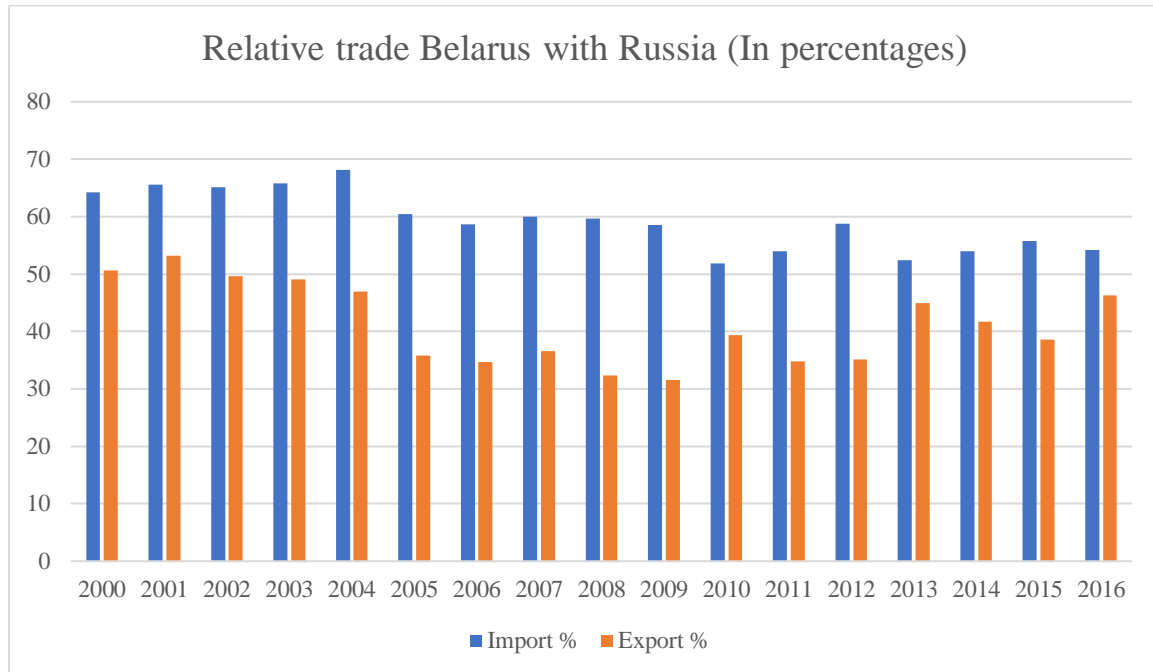
Economically, Russia is the main trading partner of Belarus. In the following graph, several developments are visible. After 2004, there is a sharp decline in the share of import and export from and to Russia. Still the import stays around 60% and the export around 30-35% which is a significant part of the economy. A low is detected around 2010 for import percentage, which can be due to the economic crisis.

In 2013, an increase in export to Russia of roughly 10% is visible. A possible explanation would be that a decrease of trade with the EU caused this relative growth for Russia. In the same year, a decrease of exports to the EU (see graph 1) is visible of 26%. This can be explained by looking at the Belarus – EU relation during that period.

As elaborated upon in the previous section, between 2011 and 2013, the relation between Belarus and the EU took a blow due to visa restrictions on Belarusian officials. In

terms of economy, this became visible after 2012. When linking this back to the trade with Russia, it becomes visible that the export grew from 16.1 billion in 2012 to 16.7 billion in 2013.

Graph 2



Source: World Integrated Trade Solution

4.2 Three time periods in the Belarusian position towards Abkhazia

The position of Belarus towards Abkhazia, as shown, has been changed over time. Between the declaration of independence by Abkhazia in 1999 and 2018, I have identified three time periods. These periods fit with the three different positions states can take towards *de facto* states as identified by Simon Pegg which are partially recognising, ignoring or opposing *de facto* states.

4.2.1 1999-2008

Between the declaration of independence in 1999 and 2008, the Belarusian position towards Abkhazia was to ignore its independence or existence in the first place. In this particular

time period, Belarus did not differ from the rest of the world since this declaration of independence did not generally create any response from any state. Although there are no figures of trade available for Abkhazia since it is not recognised by any international organisation that keeps track of trade, the Belarusian trade with Georgia in 1999 consisted of 0,02% export and import (World Integrated Trade Solution, sd). These figures do show that trade between Belarus and Abkhazia seem very unlikely at the time. Furthermore, neither the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus nor Belarusian or Abkhazian news agencies show interaction between Belarus or Abkhazia prior to 2008.

4.2.2 2008-2010

In 2008, the general position of Abkhazia changed with the sudden recognition by the Russian Federation on August 26, 2008. It is believed that one of the triggers for this event was the recognition of Kosovo by a large amount of states on February 17, 2008. In September 2008, Lukashenko stated that Belarus does have bilateral ties with Abkhazia on several levels but that they do not recognise it yet since it was a rather acute event after two decades of conflict. In the same period, the war between Russia and Georgia emerged. This can be seen as a second trigger to change stances for Belarus. Previously, interference within the region could be avoided. With the sudden recognition of Abkhazia by Russia as well as the war between Russia and Georgia, Belarus had to act due to its allegiance to Russia. This became a dilemma for Belarus, with Russia on the one hand as an important partner and the EU on the other hand as a partner, since either recognising it as well as not recognising it could result in a negative backlash. This could potentially explain the semi-recognition, lack of determination, by Belarus.

This semi-recognition ties in with a different method of dealing with *de facto* states. Here Belarus does not ignore, nor does it recognise or oppose Abkhazia. Abkhazia had entered

the grey zone between recognition and non-recognition in the Belarusian foreign policy. Even though it was not recognised, Abkhazia had been referred to by Belarusian officials as a Republic in multiple speeches and interview. Aside from that, the leader of Abkhazia was referred to as President, which implies the leader of a state (Lukashenko, September 2008) (Lukashenko, March 2009).

There are multiple benefits to being partially recognised or gaining limited acceptance from a state. Full recognition can limit the capabilities of the leading actors in the country due to interference by the recognising state. In general, a form of limited acceptance does not imply this kind of interference, although it is not excluded (Pegg 1998, 7). In the case of Belarus and Abkhazia, the partial recognition did not imply interference on a governmental level in Abkhazia by Belarusian officials, nor did the recognition reach a thorough state which intertwined the two parties. It might have been more of a symbolic meaning towards Abkhazia rather than a direct engagement. This time period lasted roughly till 2010 when the stance of Belarus changed once again.

4.2.3 2010 onwards

In 2010, Russian president Medvedev and Lukashenko fell out concerning the Abkhazian case. This resulted in a shift of foreign policy by Belarus towards Abkhazia; the recognition of Abkhazia by Belarus had been denied, if not opposed. Looking back at the three ways to deal with *de facto* states, this was the third option left for Belarus. This argument between the two presidents was based on the fact that Lukashenko arguably promised to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but later failed to do so. In turn, Lukashenko stated that first the consequences of recognising the Georgian breakaway regions had to be considered (Novonite 2010). This deteriorated the relation between Russia and Belarus.

In October 2010, Lukashenko stated why Belarus did not recognise Abkhazia. The main reason provided was that Russia did not want to share the burden of the consequences that would be passed onto Belarus (Civil.ge, 2010). In several statements by Belarusian officials, the stance of Belarus towards the self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia has remained unchanged (BelTA 2012a) (BelTA 2012b) (BelTA 2013) (BelTA 2014). In the years that followed from 2010, Belarus remained an important actor when forming Abkhazian foreign policy. As previously explained, the Belarusian visa criteria differ from other nationalities that wish to enter Abkhazia. Nonetheless, this has not resulted in recognition by Belarus thus far. In 2014, Abkhazia officially appealed to Belarus to gain recognition. The letter says (transl.) ‘... Mr. President, we ask you to consider the question of recognition by the Republic of Belarus of the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Abkhazia’ (Tut.by, 2014). This was not the only plea that received a negative response from Minsk.

Additionally, since 2015 the diplomatic relationships between Belarus and Georgia have been improving. Both countries have put significant effort into this relationship. In April 2015, the first official visit of the Belarusian president to Georgia took place. This marked the beginning of an improved relationship with diplomatic missions in 2016, several official visits of Georgian officials to Belarus in 2016-2017 and even the Days of Culture of the Republic of Belarus in 2017 were held in 2017. Moreover, the Ministry reported an increase in overall trade between Belarus and Georgia of 6% and even a 10% growth of export towards Georgia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus – Belarus-Georgia). In September 2017, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Belarus and Georgia discussed and reaffirmed the improving bilateral relationship, focussing on political, trade and other economic interaction (BelTA 2017). By taking this improving relationship into account, one can argue that Belarus moved towards the EU but also tried to keep, or possibly gain, Georgia as a friend while balancing against Russia. Even though Belarus and the EU have had their struggles as partners, Belarus also moved

towards Georgia as a new partner. This also implies a move away from possible recognition of Abkhazia.

On March 24, 2018, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia issued a statement regarding the visit of Lukashenko to Tbilisi that same week. During this meeting, further political cooperation was discussed between Georgia and Belarus as well as the global and regional situations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia responded to this meeting and specific statements by Lukashenko concerning Abkhazia. During the meeting Lukashenko had referred to Abkhazia as incomprehensible, which the Ministry considers to be an unworthy, insulting statement by the head of state of Belarus (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2018b). Furthermore, the Ministry once again addressed the legitimacy of its statehood, emphasising on the tasks at hand in Abkhazia, its international relations, and the tourism it attracts.

4.2.4. Belarusian justification of the decision not to recognize Abkhazia

The main justification for the decision in 2010 not to recognize Abkhazia can be traced back to the period of partial recognition between 2008 and 2010. In this period, Lukashenko mentioned recognising Abkhazia as a possibility on several occasions but declared that he did not want to make that decision yet. For this, he mentions several different reasons which were eventually mentioned as official reasons why Belarus would not recognize the self-declared independence of Abkhazia. In an interview with the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on September 18, 2008, Lukashenko replies to the question why Belarus has not yet recognised Abkhazia. He responds that first of all, the issue became very acute. It was born in confrontation and the result of two decades of tension in the region and he would not make a hasted decision on this matter.

The second reason ties in with the Belarusian parliamentary election of 2008. These elections were held on September 28, 2008 and would result in a new parliament. Although in Belarus the decision of recognition is made by the President - as mentioned by Lukashenko -, he wanted the new parliament to have a say in it. He stated that 'maybe the new parliament will have some other arguments and facts that I do not know about' (Lukashenko, 2008).

Thirdly, Lukashenko did not want to hurry this matter simply for the reason he wishes not to hurry. Immediately, he follows this statement with the fact that Medvedev also took his time, engaging in several debates before making the decision. Lukashenko also claims that recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia would not mean that it is only to support and please Russia. Furthermore, he lashes out to the case of Kosovo, which he mentioned is a precedent to the recognition crisis of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Lukashenko, 2008).

Shortly before Russia recognised Abkhazia as an independent state, Kosovo was widely recognised as an independent state by many other states. The official statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus to the self-declared independence of Kosovo was:

'The Republic of Belarus believes that the settlement of the Kosovo and Metochia status should progress under international law, based on UN Security Council resolution 1244 (of 1999) which is a fundamental document for the Kosovo settlement certifying the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, and based on the key provisions of the UN Charter and Helsinki Final Act, with the essential role of the UN Security Council bearing a predominant responsibility for safeguarding international peace and security.'

The Republic of Belarus is convinced that the only way to address tensions and achieve stability in the region is political settlement which comes back down to a negotiation between Belgrade and Priština, with possible involvement of international intermediaries.'

Belarus hopes that a mutually acceptable settlement of the Kosovo and Metochia status could be achieved in line with the conventional standards and principles of international law.'

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, *Statement Kosovo*, n.d.)

It shows that in the case of Kosovo, Belarus immediately points towards the 1244 resolution, which respects the territorial integrity of Serbia. This also contradicts with the third reason of Lukashenko not to recognise Abkhazia immediately, simply because he wished not to hurry the decision. In the case of Kosovo, the decision was made rather fast and without too much debate, although the situation surrounding the independence of Kosovo could also be argued to be rather complex. Furthermore, the international agreements in the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act on state sovereignty are of great importance in the response by Belarus.

Interesting is that in the case of Abkhazia, these agreements, acts and resolutions did not appear in any response by Belarus. The key difference between the case of Kosovo and Abkhazia in the case of Belarus would be that Russia did not recognise Kosovo either. This would not result in any pressure or leverage from Russia, which is trying to influence the decision of Belarus.

Recognition of Kosovo and possible leverage by the EU is slightly more complicated. Reason for this is that in the case of Abkhazia, none of the member states of the EU recognised the Abkhazian independence, whereas Kosovo was recognised by all member states except for Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia, Spain and Romania. Besides the fact that not all EU member states recognised Kosovo, there were plenty more other states that did not recognise Kosovo, so any sanctions or consequences from the EU would be very unlikely.

Because of this, the situation surrounding the Kosovo claim on independence was not a political game between the EU and Russia, hence Belarus was not put in the position between the EU and Russia in which it was forced in the case of Abkhazia, several months later.

Later in 2008, an interview between the Financial Times and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Martynov, once again stressed that it is an important and delicate matter that needs time to process as well as the insights from the newly elected parliament (Martynov, 2008). On July 29, 2009, which is almost 9 months later, in an interview by Agence Europe as well as on a press conference the day prior to this interview, Martynov again mentioned that it was a delicate matter that needed time to be discussed by the Belarusian president and parliament (Martynov, 2009b).

Here some things are mention worthy. Apparently, there had been ongoing talks about the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia between September 2008 and July 2009, but no real progress had been made due to the complex nature of the situation. Another explanation, which I would argue could very well be the case, is that Belarus was stalling the progress on this case. There is a major reason to stagnate the national debate on recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia: the position of Russia and the European Union, two powerful allies of Belarus.

With the benefit of cheap Russian gas at stake, Belarus was put in the exact middle between the EU and Russia. This position could work out in different ways. It could either tear Belarus in both directions, or it would allow Belarus to benefit from both parties and therefore indirectly benefit from the opposing (world)views of the EU and Russia.

When looking into the sources provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, the Presidency as well as the state-owned news agencies of Belarus, some things become apparent. The news articles, as well as statements and interviews, tend to remain vague and general, and do not go into specific details. This shows a clear hesitation on account of Belarus in making the decision, as well as addressing the problem it faces. Most of the answers between 2008 and 2010 go back to the argued fact that the decision making takes time due to the complex

nature of the case. After 2010 the sources provide barely more detail other than the arguments provided by Lukashenko concerning the decision of Belarus against recognising Abkhazia. In these arguments, Abkhazia or its actions are not mentioned to have shaped or influenced the decision making of Belarus. Additionally, there are no graphical sources such as pictures on meetings between Lukashenko or Abkhazian officials or visits of Belarusian officials to Abkhazia.

4.3 Belarus in between the EU and Russia

This position, in between the EU and Russia geographically, but now also economically and politically, has played a role in the recognition of Abkhazia as well. When taking 2008 as the starting point of the decision making by Belarus on the recognition of Abkhazia, its view has changed a lot. As previously explained, this standpoint changed from working towards recognition to non-recognition eventually. In this section, the choices for Belarus will be discussed and how the final decision was constructed as well as why this was the outcome.

I would argue in this case of Belarusian recognition of Abkhazia, it is not just the influence and policy of the EU and Russia towards Belarus, but also the position, policy and influence of Belarus towards the EU and Russia.

Indeed, at first, Belarus “promised” recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia but took its time to overthink its possibilities. The obvious possibilities would be either recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or not to do so. I would argue the underlying possibilities were, and still are, of greater importance, although the international topic of Abkhazian recognition has cooled down over time.

The underlying possibilities and options for Belarus are not related to Abkhazia or its independence, but more so to the position of Russia and the EU, which have been shown to be Belarus’ most important partners. This fits the realist approach that becomes visible in the

multi-vector policy of Belarus. In the theoretical case of recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Belarus would have followed the Russian example. If Belarus theoretically would decide not to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which is currently the case, it would follow the path of the EU.

It would be pointless to argue that by not recognising Abkhazia, Belarus completely turned away from Russia, but it can be seen as a form of approaching (or propitiating) the EU at an important period in growing relationships between Belarus and the EU.

When the decision was made not to recognise Abkhazia, Lukashenko was asked why Belarus did not recognise the Abkhazian independence from Georgia. In a reply to this, Lukashenko stated that Belarus was in fact ready to recognise the breakaway region, but eventually decided not to. The reason given was that Russia did not promise to share or relieve Belarus from the (negative) consequences from the European Union that would befall Belarus (Civil Georgia 2010).

The negative consequences as mentioned by Lukashenko refer to the consequences the EU would implement in case Belarus would recognise Abkhazia. This was already mentioned in 2009 by Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic¹ Karel Schwarzenberg who stated that such a decision by Belarus to recognise Abkhazia would isolate Minsk. On February 24, 2009 Schwarzenberg said that ‘if they [Belarus] recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia it would create a very, very difficult situation for Belarus because Belarus would be outside the European consensus’ (UNPO, 2009).

This statement was given two months prior to an EU decision about whether to keep the political sanctions against Belarus at the low point they were on, or whether these sanctions should once again be increased. Moreover, the statement was three months prior to the launch of the Eastern Partnership. Although Martynov claimed that the Eastern Partnership and the

¹ The Czech Republic held the position of presidency of the Council of the European Union during that time

Abkhazian case did not influence each other, it could be a powerful incentive not to recognise Abkhazia.

During the same period, Belarus and Russia had a diplomatic standoff. According to Lukashenko, Russia offered 500 million dollars in loan to persuade Belarus to recognise Abkhazia. Lukashenko responded that the Belarusian decision on the Abkhazia case could not be bought (Oliphant, 2009).

Medvedev had claimed that Lukashenko promised to recognise Abkhazia and that Lukashenko did not live up to this promise. In turn, Lukashenko claimed that it was not a promise, but he merely mentioned the possibility (Novonite, 2010).

On June 6, 2009, Russia increased the pressure on Belarus by putting a dairy ban in place. Although former Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed it was purely economic, its timing could argue that it was simply leverage over Belarus to have Minsk recognise Abkhazia. The dairy business was once again targeted by Russian authorities in 2010 and it was threatened to be targeted again in 2014. This, among many other industries, forms a strong leverage over Belarus (Lomagin 2017, 100-101).

Because of these two parties, Belarus was put in a peculiar situation. The options were either recognising Abkhazia and possibly facing EU sanctions, or not recognising Abkhazia and facing Russian sanctions. In short, this meant that Belarus would either suffer the EU leverage (concerning the Eastern Partnership and economical sanctions as well as possible travel bans for Belarusian officials), or the Russian leverage (concerning the Belarusian dairy industry or the Russian gas supply).

4.4 Importance of Abkhazia's argument in the decision making by Belarus

In this specific case I would argue that the question about Abkhazia is subordinate to the relationships with either the EU or Russia. Although Belarus was forced into this position

by the opposing views from the EU and Russia, they decided to make the best decision based on these two parties rather than on the opinion or position of Abkhazia.

By postponing the decision, Belarus created a time frame for themselves as well as for the EU and Russia to come up with a “game-plan” on how to act in this specific situation. Both parties could either cater to or threaten Belarus given the circumstances. Eventually, Belarus was forced by both parties to either decide in their favour, or to face negative consequences.

When looking at this matter from this perspective, it is almost as if Abkhazia did not matter at all anymore, at least not to Belarus. I sincerely doubt the decision by Belarus would have been different if this concerned another *de facto* state, if the conditions would have been the same (i.e. an origin state of little importance to Belarus and the EU and Russia with opposing views).

Eventually the choice was made not to recognise Abkhazia and it is clear that Belarus thought through their decision thoroughly. Because Lukashenko blamed Moscow for not promising to back up Belarus in dealing with the possible negative consequences from the EU, it shows that the initial plan was to follow Russia’s lead and recognise Abkhazia.

Due to the significant importance of the EU to Belarus, it needed reassurance that the country would not suffer from a decision that could imply sanctions from the EU. If Russia could not (or would not) back up Belarus, such a decision could turn out disastrous for Belarus.

Even though Russia could sanction Belarus over the non-recognition of Abkhazia, the Belarusian move towards the West could possibly be the reassurance needed. With the launch of the Eastern Partnership, Belarus and the EU entered a new age of political and economic relations. This Partnership opened up new possibilities for both Belarus and the EU to improve its relations. It is argued that because of this, Belarus was rewarded by the EU. As a reward, the travel ban for Belarusian officials was suspended. This ban had been in place since 2004 as a leverage against Belarus to impose political reforms (Rutland 2008, 2).

If the decision to recognise or not to recognise Abkhazia was made by Belarus based on Abkhazia, rather than on the trade-off between the EU or Russia, it would have addressed specific reasons on why or why not to. Arguments in favour of recognising Abkhazia are the attempted genocide by Georgia and the repression of the Abkhaz people. Arguments against recognising Abkhazia are respecting the territorial integrity of Georgia, as well as the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference, and the principles of sovereignty and independence.

None of these arguments were mentioned by Lukashenko, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus or any other authority in Belarus involved in the case of Abkhazia. Instead, it mentioned that not recognising Abkhazia was based on Russia not being able to deliver any reassurance to back Belarus against possible consequences from the West.

By taking the possibilities for Belarus in account, it shows that recognising Abkhazia or not was a mere trade-off between the relations with the EU or Russia. Because of this, I would argue Abkhazia was not in the position to influence the Belarusian decision. In a more abstract way, I would argue that in the case that a recognising state is not internally influenced (i.e. having a breakaway region or dependence on the parent state), a *de facto* state's actions possibly do not influence the decision of the recognising state, at least not as much as the actions and positions of external actors would. This is due to the greater importance of external actors than of *de facto* states when it concerns the matter of recognising a state.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter three different time periods are identified in the approach from Belarus towards Abkhazia. These time periods can be linked to the three alternative ways to deal with *de facto* states as introduced by Pegg. Between roughly 1999 and 2008 Belarus ignored the existence of Abkhazia or, at least, did not engage in any apparent way. The second period can be identified as roughly between 2008 and 2010. In this period, Belarus partially recognised

Abkhazia. Belarus did not actively interfere in the region, but it expressed solidarity in multiple ways. Thirdly, from 2010 onwards, Belarus opposed the Abkhazian independence and developed a diplomatic relation with Georgia.

The multi-vector and realist foreign policy of Belarus shows the great importance of Russia and the EU on Belarus. The policy of the EU and Russia towards the shared neighbourhood and Belarus has changed over the past decades. The EU has changed from non-interest towards a gentle approach to the neighbourhood aimed at shared benefit. With the beginning of Putin's presidency, Russia has changed its approach from aiming at the whole region towards a focus on bilateral ties. This new approach is aimed at self-interest for Russia.

The relationship between the EU and Belarus has been troublesome, for example with the EU often criticising the human rights in Belarus. Nonetheless, the EU and Belarus engaged in bilateral ties with the Eastern Partnership. For Belarus, the EU holds great importance since it is the second largest trading partner of Belarus, right behind Russia. The relationship between Russia and Belarus can be found in the Union State between the two countries. Their policies often follow similar patterns and the cooperation evolves on a high level. Economically, Belarus is rather dependent on Russia. Furthermore, Belarus and Russia, together with Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Eurasian Economic Union.

The Belarusian process of recognising Abkhazia lasted for a long period, after which it eventually failed. Lukashenko brought forth three reasons why Belarus took the time to make the decision. First of all, it was a delicate and acute matter that emerged after two decades of conflict. Secondly, there were Belarusian parliamentary elections coming up which Lukashenko perceived to be important since the new parliament should have a say as well. Thirdly, Lukashenko simply did not wish to hurry on such a delicate matter. The fact that the decision-making took a long time differs from the case of recognising Kosovo. This decision

was made within a matter of days. Eventually, Belarus decided against recognising Abkhazia as independent.

My argument is that for this decision Belarus outweighed the consequences by Russia and the EU rather than looking at the individual case of Abkhazia. The explanation for this can be found in the response of Lukashenko when asked why Belarus decided not to recognise Abkhazia. According to Lukashenko, the main reason was because Russia did not want to share nor help Belarus to bear the consequences of the EU. Belarus did not mention any of the reasons presented by the EU not to recognise Abkhazia which can also be seen as an indicator that Abkhazia's case did not influence the decision making. Previously, it also did not mention any of the reasons presented by Russia to recognise Abkhazia. This has led me to believe that the question of recognising or not recognising Abkhazia was subordinate to the question to follow the EU or Russia. Therefore, my conclusion is that it was not up to Abkhazia to influence the decision making of Belarus. It was rather the influence of the bigger players (EU and Russia) that has led to the final decision of Belarus.

Conclusion

To answer the research question of this thesis; *how has Belarusian foreign policy dealt with the case of Abkhazia's self-proclaimed independence?* I would argue that Belarus has been significantly influenced by other parties than Abkhazia, especially Russia and the EU. This becomes clear in the statements provided by Lukashenko and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus. Belarus does not mention any of the motives of the EU nor Russia to either recognise Abkhazia or not. Instead, Belarus based its decision on the fact that Russia would not support Belarus in dealing with the case of negative consequences from the EU in the event of recognising Abkhazia. This has led me to conclude that the self-justification of Abkhazia is not relevant for the decision making of Belarus. The fact that Belarus did not recognise the self-declared independence of Abkhazia can be seen as one of the means through which Belarus improved its relationship with the EU. This improved relationship arguably resulted in the ban on Belarusian officials being lifted. In 2015, the relationship between Belarus and Georgia improved after both states put effort in (re)building this relationship. This shows that Belarus is no longer solely focussed on the EU or Russia but shifted its focus more towards Georgia within this matter. The improved relation with Georgia and the importance of this relationship can be viewed as a reason why Belarus did not decide to follow Russia in this case when the relationship between Belarus and the EU deteriorated.

The reason that Abkhazia's argument was not of great importance for the Belarusian decision making is based on the status and position of Abkhazia. First, the criteria of the Montevideo convention have been applied to Abkhazia. Arguably, these criteria provide a basis for statehood according to the declaratory theory of state. This would mean that Abkhazia can be viewed as a state in accordance to these criteria as well as the definition of a state as presented by Weber. Being considered to be a state could provide Abkhazia multiple benefits. The main benefits would be the possibility to become a member of international organisations as well as

being eligible for funds from international funds that have statehood as a criterion. This could provide an argument for Belarus to recognise Abkhazia, but it has not been mentioned by any official in any statement.

In the shared neighbourhood of the EU and Russia, several states have sufficient motives not to recognise Abkhazia. These motives derive from having an own break-away region in the cases of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, or being economically dependent on Georgia in the case of Armenia. Here Belarus is identified as the odd one out as it does not have a breakaway region nor economic dependency on Georgia. The policy of the EU and Russia on this neighbourhood are of great importance to these states and especially Belarus. Here the Belarusian dependence on both the EU and Russia becomes clear. This could be seen as an argument why Belarus got stuck in the position between the EU and Russia concerning the Abkhazian independence.

This high dependence forms a basis for the decision making of Belarus as shown in Chapter 4. The research has identified three time periods of ignoring the self-declared independence of Abkhazia by Belarus, partially recognising Abkhazia and opposing the independence of Abkhazia. This is clearly related to the three ways to deal with de facto states as presented in the conceptual framework. The first time period lasted from 1999 till 2008, the second from 2008 till 2010 and the last from 2010 onwards. This is heavily influenced by the Russian and EU policy towards Belarus. It was not a matter of recognising or not recognising the Abkhazian independence, but rather of choosing between the EU and Russia.

For further research, I would recommend looking into the current relationship between Belarus and Georgia and how this reflects on Abkhazia. Recently, the relation between these two states have been improved. Taking this into consideration as well as the relations with Russia and the EU, how is the future between Abkhazia and possibly its relationship with Belarus to be expected? Furthermore, I would recommend researching Kazakhstan as a second

case study due to its importance in Abkhazian foreign policy. Kazakhstan does not depend on the EU and Russia in the same way as Belarus does, but it does share the low-level relation with Georgia. This would make it an interesting case study to consider in further research. Within the bigger picture, it would be advised to look at the general influence of de facto states in their recognition or whether it is a common situation that, like in the case of Abkhazia, the de facto state barely can influence the decision making of the recognising state. This could also be related to research on the influence of third-parties in recognition cases.

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