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Abstract

This thesis aims to explain why the *de facto* authorities of the non-recognised state of Transnistria use multiple strategies in their desire to achieve internal and external legitimacy by engaging in nation-building and state-building. These strategies consist of one or more policies with a specific aim, and an argumentation of why the state, and by extension its regime, ought to be recognised. These arguments are remedial secession, historical statehood and earned sovereignty.

Using Qualitative Content Analysis to analyse scholarly articles, government statements and local news outlets published between 1989 and 2019, I inductively build up a typology that distinguishes between four distinct strategies: strategies that aim to strengthen external legitimacy by appealing to the wishes of the international community, those that aim to strengthen internal legitimacy by appealing to the needs of the population, and those that aim to do both or neither. The typology also accounts for the prevalence of certain policies in one of the four distinguished periods of the *de facto* state's existence.

I provide three interconnecting explanations of why certain strategies prevail over others in different time periods. Firstly, strengthening internal and external legitimacy are different goals and therefore require a different strategy. Constrained by limited resources, the nation-builders have to prioritise these strategies. Secondly, ever-changing domestic and international geopolitical and socio-economic developments determine which policies and arguments will be effective. Lastly, strategies do not exist in isolation to each other, but are built upon by more refined arguments and renewed policies.

Introduction

Non-recognised states challenge the way we judge the Westphalian order – a global system of mutually recognised independent states that have seemingly existed since time immemorial and will forever continue to exist. When new states are born, they are generally quickly absorbed into this system, as happened after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But what happens when the international community deems their claim to sovereignty unfounded, but the state is nevertheless able to exercise control over its territory and inhabitants? How do the authorities of such states try to convince recognised states, as well as their local population, that their claim to independent statehood is legitimate?

Despite the conventional logic that recognition by other states is a prerequisite for both legal statehood and a state's ability to survive in the order, Eurasia is scattered with examples of political entities that have failed to secure Westphalian sovereignty. Nevertheless, these entities function quite similarly to their recognised counterparts. Still, non-recognition states are disadvantaged. International engagement, such as travel, trade and banking, is severely hindered by limited integration into the global order. Additionally, this affects the state's ability to improve the local population's living standards. Therefore, the authorities of *de facto* states will make special efforts to ease such limitations, and to convince their population that their current situation is preferable to the alternative, be it emigration or re-integration with the parent state. This thesis centres around this quest of *de facto* states to be seen as the legitimate authority of their territory.

One such state is Transnistria[1], a *de facto* state home to around half a million people, bordering Moldova and Ukraine, which has been outside of Moldovan control since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Its authorities' statements and actions regarding non-recognition is the focus of this thesis, which aims to shed light on the deployment of different legitimisation strategies regarding non-recognition. Specifically, the project poses the following research question: what explains the use of multiple legitimisation strategies by the Transnistrian authorities?

Answering this question is relevant for multiple reasons. Firstly, it challenges the preconceived notion that breakaway territories are unworthy of academic scrutiny, "for fear of implicitly legitimizing a regime or even a state that does not deserve it" (Von Steinsdorff & Fruhstorfer 2012). States and international organisations need not worry about this, as there are ample opportunities for engagement with *de facto* states without recognition (Ker-Lindsay 2015). Implicit legitimisation should not worry political scientists either, as the existence of such entities can make us rethink concepts central to our field, such as statehood, independence and authority.

There is also the realist view that such entities are mere pawns of a stronger state, and therefore lack independent agency that can be studied (Isachenko 2008: 366). I argue that we should not see independence as a dichotomous variable, as all states, recognised or not, are influenced and constrained by others to a certain extent.

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[1] While the territory has renamed itself the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Приднестровская Молдавская Республика), PMR or Pridnestrovie for short, the consensus among academics is to continue using the historical term Transnistria (Comai & Venturi 2015: 900). Although this is also the term used by the Moldovan authorities, my usage is not to be seen as an endorsement for their position. Neither is this the case when I refer to Transnistria or related terms without any denominators like "de facto" or "non-recognised". This is solely to improve readability.

Among those who have studied non-recognised states as (semi-)independent actors, some argue that its authorities have not seriously pursued independence, as the current state of legal limbo is profitable for them (Kosienkowski 2012). This project demonstrates that although this might have been the case in the early beginnings of Transnistria's statehood, it certainly no longer applies.

Finally, and crucially, an all-encompassing overview of Transnistria's legitimisation strategies is lacking in literature. Common implicit assumptions about achieving legitimacy include that it is a one-dimensional goal with a single fixed strategy, and that governments of flawed democracies, which non-recognised states often are, do not need worry about public opinion (Protsyk 2009). However, authorities of a non-recognised state have to perform a difficult balancing act by ensuring popular support and internal cohesion, without forgetting to keep an eye on the international acceptability of the regime and their claim to independent statehood (Caspersen 2012: 109). While *de facto* authorities will ultimately try to implement a strategy that strengthens both their internal and external legitimacy, there have also been instances in which one takes precedence over the other, or in which a clear strategy is lacking altogether.

Using Qualitative Content Analysis, I investigate how the Transnistrian authorities have voiced three common arguments for recognition, and I show that they are part of more general strategies of the state's political elite. The main distinction I make is between strategies that aim to strengthen internal and/or external legitimacy. I conclude that the behaviour of Transnistria's authorities can be well described using a typology, which could also be applied to other non-recognised states. My main argument explaining why Transnistria uses multiple strategies is that strategies do not exist in isolation to each other, but are carefully refined and expanded upon by nation-builders as time progresses, allowing them to maximise their potential in strengthening the state's legitimacy.

More generally, I state that *de facto* states deserve a place in the political system, and the academic study thereof, as their behaviour is essentially governed by the same rules as recognised states (Comai 2018). A better understanding of the workings of *de facto* states could improve the livelihoods of their inhabitants, and is therefore worth striving for.

The rest of this thesis is outlined as follows. In the theory section I elaborate on how other authors have looked at non-recognised states' quest for legitimacy, while introducing my main concepts. Furthermore, I outline my theoretical framework and its observable implications. Why I selected this case and how I collected and analysed the relevant data is discussed in the research design section. The empirical section is where I investigate my case closely and discuss my findings. These are briefly recapitulated in my conclusion, in which I also point out the limits of this project and avenues for future research.

Theory

This section discusses the relevant literature on the concepts used in this thesis, and introduces the theory I will apply to my case.

Literature Review

Non-recognised states have been an anomaly in the international order since their inception, and it is the particularities of their status that have received the lion's share of academic attention. The arguments non-recognised states have used to strengthen their claim to recognition are threefold, and are discussed in the second section of this review. Firstly, the application of concepts central to the nature of (non-recognised) states is discussed.

States & nation-building

A state is a sovereign institutional apparatus that governs a fixed territorial entity (Opello et al. 2004: 5). There are two dimensions to sovereignty, internal and external, and most states in the global system possess both. Internal (or domestic) sovereignty “refers to state authority structures and their effectiveness in ensuring control”, whereas external (legal) sovereignty is “states recognizing one another” (Krasner 1999 in Dembinska & Campana 2017: 258). In essence, Moldova possesses external sovereignty over the territory of Transnistria, but lacks internal sovereignty, and the opposite is true for the Transnistrian authorities.

A closely related concept is legitimacy. Internal legitimacy is the extent to which people judge their state’s existence to be rightful and just. This project uses the distinction of internal legitimacy in three dimensions (Bakke et al. 2014: 591). One might question the legitimacy of a state’s existence altogether (state legitimacy), or belief that the state is legitimate, but its incumbent administration is not (regime legitimacy), or that it ought to be a republic instead of a monarchy (institutional legitimacy).
External legitimacy is sometimes used interchangeably with sovereignty or recognition (Caspersen 2008: 120), but in this project it is regarded as a prerequisite for external sovereignty. External actors have to deem a state’s existence legitimate before it will be granted

sovereignty and subsequent incorporation into the global order. The distinction by Bakke et al. (2014: 593) could therefore be applied externally as well.

This project next turns to non-recognised states, also called *de facto* states, quasi-states, or pseudo-states. As the latter two terms also refer to states that have external sovereignty but lack internal sovereignty, such as Libya or Somalia, this project refrains from using them (Kolstø 2006: 724). A common starting point for a definition of non-recognised states is the Montevideo Convention of 1933, during which a definition of what constitutes a state was first codified in modern international law (Stanislawksi 2008: 367). Based on this convention's definition, non-recognised states are states that meet three requirements, having a permanent population, a defined territory and a government, but fail to meet the fourth requirement, the "capacity to enter into relations with the other states" (Montevideo Convention 1933 in League of Nations 1936: 25). However, this definition was never intended to be applied to non-recognised states and merely codified a pre-existing local reality. Crucially, it fails to further specify what is meant by "relations".

Therefore, this project uses Pål Kolstø's criteria for non-recognised states. Kolstø has written extensively on this topic (1998; 2006; with Blakkisrud 2011; 2012) and his definition is also used by other academics in this field, which eases comparability (Kolstø in Caspersen 2012: 22, 78). His list of criteria reads: its leadership must be in control of (most of) its claimed territory, and it must have sought, but not achieved, international recognition by other states. Also, it must have existed for at least two years (Kolstø 2006: 725-726).

States are commonly associated with nations, often by tying them together in a single concept: the nation-state. It is the idea that a people are geographically, culturally and legally bound to one another. Some explain nations through a primordial approach and maintain that nations naturally arise from smaller levels of organisation, such as kinship, and are fixed once established (Bayar 2009: 1643). However, clearly traceable ethnic origins are neither necessary nor sufficient for nation-building, as “the objective modernity of nations in the historian’s eyes” is unlikely to hinder the “subjective antiquity” of nation-builders’ activities (Anderson 2006: 5). Therefore, a constructivist approach seems better suited to explain the topic of this thesis. The idea of nationhood being ultimately established by the actions and interactions of individuals is epitomised by Anderson’s notion of imagined communities (1983). Nations are imagined, because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”, and they are communities because “the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (2006: 6, 7).

Lastly, these nation-builders are policy entrepreneurs who are carefully and intentionally guiding “a process which leads to the formation of countries in which the citizens feel a sufficient amount of commonality of interests, goals and preferences so that they do not wish to separate from each other” (Alesina & Reich 2013: 3). It is distinct from state-building, which is “the establishment of the administrative, economic, and military groundwork of functional states” (Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2008). However, the two reinforce each other, as state institutions legitimise a nation’s existence, and a shared sense of nationhood will strengthen the functioning of said institutions. Careful cultivation of this interplay serves two goals: it aims to strengthen both the internal and the external legitimacy of the (intended) nation-state. While state-building and nation-building are continuous processes, the main underlying argumentation and its intended recipient may change. Academics have identified three main arguments that nation-builders of unrecognised states have used to bolster their claims.

Arguments for recognised statehood

The first argument for recognised statehood is "historical statehood" (Voronovici 2019), which aims to justify the existence of a state by providing, not to say concocting, historical and/or legal evidence of a predecessor to the current state in that same region. An example is how the leaders of the post-2014 Donetsk People's Republic in Eastern Ukraine refer to the short-lived and equally unrecognised 1918 Donets-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic as their predecessor (ibid.: 6-7). In the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian and Azeri historians are essentially engaged in a battle to prove 'who was here first', going back as far as the fourth millennium BCE (Smith et al. 1998: 51), showing the creativity and "the persistence of local aspirations" with which rulers support their claim (Voronovici 2019: 10). Finding and highlighting similarities with a prior authority in the region strengthens internal legitimacy because it claims the nation is not just a modern invention, but historically relevant. The underlying argument regarding external sovereignty is straightforward: we were self-governing before, so we have the right to be self-governing now.

A second argument is to use the conflict that erupted as a result of the desire for independence as an argument for others to support that desired independence. Supposedly, the conflict demonstrates that the *de facto* state and the parent state should not be unified, and therefore the *de facto* authorities "insist on an inherent moral entitlement to self-determination in the face of 'alien' and 'imposed' rule" (Dov 2002: 837) that justifies "remedial secession" (Caspersen 2012: 37). When the Tamil Tigers talked about "unprecedented assaults" by the Sri Lankan authorities that left them with no other option but to declare an independent state, this is the implicit argument that was used (ibid.).

Thirdly, scholars have identified an argument dubbed "earned sovereignty" (Williams & Pecci 2004). This argument is used when non-recognised authorities think that "they have proved themselves to be viable states" (Caspersen 2009: 47), by "fulfilling international requirements of good governance and democratic standards" (Von Steinsdorff & Fruhstorfer 2012: 119). An example, from Papua New Guinea, is the "ten-to-fifteen-year period of institution building and sharing of sovereign authority", culminating in Bougainville's 2019 independence referendum (Williams et al. 2015: 446-447).

All these arguments are useful, as they provide a part of the puzzle. Essentially, arguments form the underlying rationale of a political strategy. If, for example, a non-recognised state's authorities deem historical statehood a potentially strong argument to advance their case, they will allocate the resources to elaborate on this argument. Therefore, government policies or discourse that can be attributed to support a certain argument serves as an observable implication for the government's choice for a certain strategy. Some arguments are intended to resonate more with the international community, some with the local population, and generally they give a good impression of what arguments *de facto* authorities use. A model which explains why some arguments are used more prominently in a given stage of the *de facto* state's existence is lacking from literature.

Theoretical Framework

In the previous sections, I have argued that authorities of non-recognised states have the ability and the desire to seek international recognition. In doing so, they are engaging in the balancing act of satisfying both their inhabitants, for without their support the claim for recognition will lose substantial credibility, and the international community, who will at the very least expect functioning state institutions based on democratic principles before they will consider recognition. This balancing act has two important implications:

1. Public opinion matters in non-recognised states, as it does in recognised states.
2. Non-recognised states work to be incorporated into the international system, even if that means voluntarily restricting its *de facto* sovereignty in certain areas.

With regards to the first implication, it is said that “no one believes that public opinion always determines public policy; few believe it never does” (Burstein 2003: 29). I see no arguments why this would not hold true in non-recognised states. The authorities’ ability to create enough incentives for people to want to build a living is a necessary condition for the continued existence of the state, not to mention its international recognition. In democratically unfree states, which is an accurate description of Transnistria (Freedom House 2019), governments try to rally public support for their actions. The causality may be different, but internal legitimacy is still a concern for authorities.

As non-recognised states aspire to become part of the international order, they are eager to demonstrate willingness to ‘play by the rules’. This is part of the strategy of “earned sovereignty”, by adhering to international conventions in the governance of states within the global system (Williams et al. 2015). In short, the authorities “must ensure popular support and internal cohesion (...) while keeping an eye on the international acceptability of the regime” (Caspersen 2012: 109).

However, these are not the only factors that determine the policies of a non-recognised state. All post-Soviet *de facto* states emerged from violent conflict, which is characterised by presence of military personnel in daily life, destruction of physical and socio-political infrastructure, disruption of economic processes, and the disappearance of the state's monopoly on violence (Caspersen 2012: 77-83). These conditions provide a breeding ground for warlordism, military influence in political decision-making, and cronyism, even long after the conflict has ended. A regime under the influences of these phenomena is less likely to make decisions that satisfy the general wishes of the population, and/or those of the international community.

To summarise: the authorities of non-recognised states have international recognition as their ultimate policy goal. They engage in state-building and nation-building to improve their chance of continued existence and recognition. "Historical statehood", "remedial secession" and "earned sovereignty" are the three main arguments used. These arguments form the basis of a certain policy, and together they form a strategy. The authorities of non-recognised states have to satisfy two audiences, their local populations and the international community, whose diverting wishes cannot always be met simultaneously. This is all under the assumption that authorities are able and willing to satisfy these audiences, which may, as a result of violent conflict, not always be the case. By closely observing how the above-mentioned arguments and challenges apply to the case of Transnistria, this project explains why the Transnistrian authorities use multiple strategies, and when and why certain strategies take precedence over others. This projects then creates a framework with which other non-recognised states can be studied as well.

Research Design

This section details my case selection, data collection and analysis and methodology.

Case Selection

Transnistria is one example of a plethora of non-recognised states fitting the definition provided in the literature section (Kolstø 2006: 725-726), together with older and economically well-developed "borderline cases" such as Taiwan, and short-lived and dysfunctional entities like Republika Srpska Krajina (Caspersen 2012: 12). This huge diversity in development and 'success' of non-recognised states limits the generalisability of the findings. Explaining this diversity is however not the goal of this project. Others have already aimed to do that (Monstad 2013).

The subset of more comparable post-Soviet *de facto* states is where most of my literature is drawn from. These states have existed for roughly the same time, were at a similar stage of economic development at their conception and inherited a similar political system. However, notable differences include Transnistria's continued existence, its relative independence from a patron-state and continuous policy to instil a unique sense of nationhood. This first difference is in contrast to the no longer existing Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Transnistria is also more independent than Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, which are both recognised by and heavily reliant on their patron state Russia. Possibly because Transnistria does not share a physical border with Russia, prime issues for independent countries, such as border security and monetary policy are handled domestically. Lastly, Artsakh's[2] national identity can be seen as an extension of

[2] Formerly Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenian identity, whereas Transnistria's identity is not to disenfranchise any of its three dominant ethnic groups. A non-exhaustive overview of the non-recognised states and relevant characteristics can be found below, serving to demonstrate how Transnistria is most, but not completely, comparable to other post-Soviet *de facto* states (in italics). Since Transnistria occupies the mean or average position in "causally relevant dimensions", such as its years of existence, economic development and ethnic-composition, it serves as a typical case within the universe of (specifically post-Soviet) *de facto* states (Gerring 2008: 8).

	Still exists	Years of existence	Economic development compared to parent state	Parent state	Multi-ethnic	Independence from patron state
Taiwan	Yes	71	Higher	China	No	None
Krajina	No	4	Lower	Bosnia	No	Dependent
Ichkeria	No	9	Lower	Russia	Yes	Independent
Abkhazia	Yes	30	Comparable	Georgia	Yes	Dependent
South Ossetia	Yes	30	Comparable	Georgia	Yes	Dependent
Artsakh	Yes	29	Comparable	Azerbaijan	No	Dependent
Trans-nistria	Yes	30	Comparable	Moldova	Yes	Independent

Data Collection and Analysis

The main data sources of this project are academic papers scrutinising state-building and nation-building practices in Transnistria, of which there are a couple of dozen. These writings are appropriate, because they are useful to discover a pattern that fits my typology. Articles from the 1990s are in this sense as helpful as more recent ones, because they provide an insight into the way the Transnistrian issue was approached at the time.

Secondly, I use reports by international institutions, transcriptions of speeches by political leaders and other government documents. Also, there are some English-language local news agencies. Lastly, the Transnistrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website has a large English-language section. This is an appropriate database for prime examples of government discourse and detailed description of government policies.

Unstructured and semi-structured exploratory interviews before and during a one-month stay in Transnistria's *de facto* capital Tiraspol in early 2020 have allowed me to better interpret and contextualise sources. Interviewees included residents on both sides of the Dniester river, a former policy-maker at the Transnistrian Foreign Ministry and someone familiar with the international communities' peace-keeping endeavours.[3]

[3] Their names are known to the researcher, but not published because of the delicate political situation.

Methodology

I have used Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to analyse the data. As opposed to its quantitative counterpart, QCA has a more interpretative focus. Its goal is the identification of categories (Assaroudi et al. 2018: 43), and it is applicable when knowledge is believed to be socially constructed (Graneheim et al. 2017: 29). I chose QCA because is it suitable for the data I have at my disposal, because it is in line with my underlying epistemology and because I have the skills to use it successfully. I have been wary not to stretch the categories to forcibly find a place for all policies within the model, as well as attempted to account for instances that do not fit the model Graneheim et al. 2017: 30-31).

I have inductively worked through my sources to identify distinct strategies. This interpretative focus, inherent to QCA, has a disadvantage, as the interpretative and therefore subjective actions of the individual researcher complicates replicability. To enhance transparency and replicability, I have asked the below-mentioned questions.

- Is this an example of a policy of which the argumentation is consistent with one of the three aforementioned arguments (remedial secession, historical statehood, earned sovereignty), or not?
- Is this policy primarily aimed internally or externally?
- Is it possible to chronologically group policies with a certain argumentation or intended audience, as per the prior two questions?

The now-following empirical section is written with these questions in mind.

Empirical Section

This section is divided in five subsections. The first four constitute a phase in the development in Transnistria, in which a certain strategy with accompanying argumentation and policies were dominant. The fifth section introduces a typology through which the four phases can be summarised.

Phase 1: Remedial secession

The land between the rivers Prut and Dniester is called Bessarabia. Here is located the present-day country of Moldova, and a large portion of the former Romanian principality with the same name (Meurs 1994). The land beyond the Dniestr river, from the Bessarabian perspective that is, is called Transnistria. Transnistria was historically part of the Russian Empire, whereas Moldova was only incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940, when it was united with Transnistria (prior part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic) to together form the Moldovan SSR. Under Gorbachov's *perestroika* (restructuring) policy, and particularly when it became apparent that the Soviet Union was ending, discussions about the historical affiliations of the region resurfaced (Cusco 2019). Ethnically, Transnistria is more diverse than Moldova, with Russians, Ukrainians and Moldovans in roughly equal proportions (Caspersen 2012: 36). Ethnicity played an important but unusual role in the violent clashes of 1990-1991, as "ethnic lines are not neatly drawn" (Kaufman 1996: 119). This subchapter discusses the origins and later characterisation of this conflict that resulted in Transnistrian *de facto* independence.

The competing political and economic interests of the Moldovan and Transnistrian elites ultimately propelled the conflict (Roper 2001: 101). In an elite-led conflict, leaders are driven by “elite conspiracy”, in which they receive foreign support to stir up tensions that serve their own and their foreign patron’s goals (Kaufman 1996: 110-111, 117). Although concerns over linguistic and cultural issues were “exploited and manipulated [by elites] in order to maintain or to attain power” (Roper 2001: 101), the Transnistrians, who were in control of most of the Moldovan SSR’s industrial infrastructure, ultimately seceded in order to “preserve full control of the region’s economic assets” (Urse 2008: 58).

After declaring independence in late 1991, the elite’s priorities were “raising revenues and an armed force, as well as seeking international recognition” (Kolossov & O’Loughlin 1998: 160). However, the economic upheaval that wrecked the Soviet Union in the early 1990s decreased foreign financial support and internal revenues. When formal recognition and subsequent incorporation into the global system did materialise, the elite looked elsewhere for the accruement of revenue to build and expand the newly-found state, and their power base in it. It is in this period an EU mission characterised Transnistria as a "black hole" in which the trafficking of weapons, nuclear material and human beings was rampant (Wiersma 2002: 6). However, structural international oversight of Transnistria’s affairs was limited, and later OSCE reports found no proof of this characterisation (Lobjakas 2005). Certainly, the *de facto* president at the time, Igor Smirnov, owned the ‘Sheriff’ conglomerate, whose monopoly in crucial sectors, such as retail and petrol, gave him immense wealth and additional power (Troebst 2003). This is a clear example of post-conflict cronyism (Caspersen 2012: 78).

The straightforwardness and intentionality with which the Transnistrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) legitimises the birth of the republic, speaking of a “natural logical result (...)

that embodied the will of the Pridnestrovian people" (MFA 2020a), starkly contrasts with the way in which Smirnov has advocated a federal system for Moldova, including Transnistria, in late 1992, only months after rejecting any solution that would not recognise Transnistria as a republic (O'Loughlin et al. 1998: 347). This project poses that the Transnistrian MFA's description of the period is written in this fashion, because any kind of rhetoric not accentuating the supposedly clearly defined goals of the Transnistrian leadership in its early years would undermine their nation-building endeavours. The leadership of a young and non-recognised state has a shaky foundation of legitimacy and authority, and cannot permit itself to be characterised as anything other than determined and benevolent (Isachenko 2008: 358). Once Transnistria's policy goals were clearly formulated, the characterisation of the conflict changed dramatically. Transnistrian rhetoric speaks of a "genocide policy implemented by the Republic of Moldova", while committing itself to "affording an opportunity for equal development of all the nations residing in the Republic" (MFA 2020a). This exaggerated threat of genocide (Kaufman 1996: 135) serves internally both to unite Transnistrians against a common enemy, and externally to justify the argument for "remedial secession" (Caspersen 2012: 37).

This project characterises the first years of Transnistrian independence as a conflict about economic power among local elites which spiralled out of control and, once the point of no return was passed, unintentionally led to the establishment of an (unrecognised) republic. The elite's actions, which ultimately lead to the 1992 war, appear to have served no interest but their own, although later state description gives a different account. The construction of the first state institutions, justified by the argument of remedial secession, has not led to recognition by the international community, but has helped in strengthening Transnistrian nationhood by the creation of a common enemy. The conflict, branded as an ethno-linguistic struggle by elites to gather local support, already carries the seeds of the next phase in the existence of the republic.

Phase 2: Historical statehood

As was described in the first phase, the Transnistrian elite's motivations were primarily economic, but were masqueraded as a national independence struggle.

This resonated with a large number of future 'Transnistrians', whose ethnic makeup consists of roughly equal parts of Moldovans, Ukrainians and Russians, in light of the fear that Moldovan nationalists in Chisinau would reunite Moldova with Romania and that Slavic minority rights would be curtailed (Kaufman 1996: 120). Even though these worries did not materialise, Moldova did not reunite with Romania and "minority rights in Moldova proper are reflecting international standards" (Popescu 2006: 11), it remains the foundation of Transnistrian national identity.

Exemplifying this, the full name of the *de facto* state is the 'Pridnestrovian *Moldavian* Republic', which should be interpreted as a sign that Transnistria sees itself as the "sole defender of the true Moldovan identity" (Dembińska & Iglesias 2013: 417), and it declares human rights *for all minorities* a state priority (MFA 2020a, emphasis added). Transnistria's claimed commitment to protect minority rights should be interpreted in the context of the dissolvement of the Soviet Union. Within constituent Soviet republics, it was often not the members of the titular nation who formed the political and economic elite, but Russians. This was also the case in Moldova, in which Russian nationals controlled the majority of the republic's heavy industry, concentrated in Transnistria. These future Transnistrian nation-builders were content with being a national minority in Soviet Moldova, which was part of a Russia(n)-dominated Soviet Union, but the prospect of losing economic and political power within an independent Moldova, let alone a reunited Greater Romania, provided a powerful impetus for independence (Meurs 2015: 186).

This self-identification as a multi-ethnic state neatly fits Transnistria's nostalgia for the Soviet era, and the continued celebration of Soviet holidays (Şveţ 2013), because "civic identity superseding individual national loyalties" was a cornerstone of Soviet nation-building practices as well (O'Loughlin et al. 1998: 334). This element of Transnistria's national identity is useful, as it provides a way of portraying Moldova as the aggressor, while deflecting attention from one of the main reasons for Transnistria's initial strive for independence.

A cornerstone of Transnistria's nation-building activities is education policy, of which this project provides a linguistic and historical example, which both illustrate how abstract self-identification translates into practice.

The importance of language became apparent when, under Gorbachov's *perestroika* policies, Moldova on the 31st of August 1989 declared Moldovan[4], in the Latin script, to be the state language, in favour of Russian. What is now celebrated as a national holiday in Moldova was a powerful catalyst instigating Transnistrian worries about their waning importance and influence (King 1994: 349).

Both the 1992 Transnistrian language law and the 1994 education law guarantee equal and official status to Moldovan (in Cyrillic), Russian and Ukrainian (MFA 2020a). While there are issues with Moldova-funded schools that teach in the Latin alphabet, Ukrainian and Moldovan schools are able to function as normal (Comai & Venturi 2015: 893). Learning a second

[4] What distinguishes Moldovan/Moldavian from Romanian is more a political than a linguistic issue. Some, including the Transnistrian authorities, argue that Moldovan is written in the Cyrillic script and Romanian in Latin. Others argue it is the same language. It is agreed upon that differences in the spoken language are negligible (Ciscel 2006).

national language is compulsory, also for Russian speakers. However, the dominance of Russian in the public, political and economic sphere significantly diminishes the usefulness and therefore importance of the other two languages for anyone who wants to make a career in Transnistrian society (ibid.). This has led to a situation of "asymmetrical bilingualism", where many native non-Russian speakers have a high command of Russian, but not vice versa (ibid. 888). I argue that this complicated and seemingly contradictory policy is nevertheless successful in achieving its goals: it allows for both internal and external characterisation of Transnistria as a more inclusive state than Moldova, while also enjoying the benefits of having a single language as a unifying factor.

A second dimension of Transnistrian nation-building policy is how the authorities have expanded upon the 1991-2011 president's claim that "Transnistrians are a people with a unique distinctiveness" (Smirnov 2003 in Dembińska 2019: 303).
One example is how the 1924-1940 Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), existing within the Ukrainian SSR and including most of present-day Transnistria, is portrayed as a historical justification for the creation of the PMR and an argument to ward off allegations that the Transnistrian republic is a new, artificially constructed entity (Voronovici 2019: 6). Then-president Smirnov claimed that, already in 1989, he "had started to look for theoretical foundations for the attempts to defend our rights" by going through archives containing historical and legal literature (Smirnov 2001 in Voronovici 2019: 5).
A second example is the 1500 page two-volume 'History of the Dnestr Moldovan Republic' published in 2000 and 2002 (Solonari 2003: 417-418). The book was co-written by local historians and political authorities, contains no references and serves the primarily ideological purpose of legitimising Transnistrian statehood (ibid.). A historical atlas of Transnistria was published in 2005, but contained so many errors that a rivalling publication, the 'Pridnestr

Historical Almanac' dedicated 24 pages to correcting these mistakes in 2006 (Matsuzato 2008: 115). As part of an all-encompassing nation-building policy, "the Transnistrian historical narrative to a large extent re-creates the Soviet world-view" (Solonari 2003: 437).
Both these policies exemplify what Anderson (2006: 5) calls the subjective antiquity of the state in the nation-builders' eyes.

This section has shown that "when the external threat can no longer serve as a source of elite legitimation, a reorientation of policies toward internal demands (...) takes place" (Dembińska & Campana 2017: 265). The careful crafting of a "distinct communal identity and historic continuity, with a claim to a 'remedial' right to secession" has made it possible for the Transnistrian elites to legitimise their existence based on the right to national self-determination, as there cannot be self-determination, if there is no nation to begin with (Caspersen 2008: 114).

Phase 3: Earned sovereignty

As time progressed, a quick solution to the conflict seemed increasingly unlikely. While the Transnistrian authorities solidified their control over the region, its neighbours, Moldova and Ukraine, found themselves in an awkward position. The reality that Transnistria effectively controls a large section of their shared border, and is thus able to facilitate smuggling of all kinds without Moldova being able to do custom checks, was a thorn in their side. This led to strengthened cooperation on border tightening initiatives, which changed the "external incentive structure" for Transnistrian elites (Crowther 2007: 299), and provided an opportunity for recognition, albeit not as a sovereign state, but as the *de facto* authorities in the region. This certainly constituted a status upgrade from being a pariah and was therefore greatly welcomed by the Transnistrian political elite. The EU Border Assistance Mission, which started in 2005, is an example of international engagement with Transnistria (Dias 2013). Even more so is the 2005 5+2 negotiation format, in which Transnistrian representatives take part in negotiations on an equal level with Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, with the EU and US as observers (ibid.: 343). While these states and IOs have made it clear that engagement is not to be interpreted as recognition (Ker-Lindsey 2015; Ker-Lindsey & Berg 2018), it is still a diplomatic success as far as the Transnistrian political elite is concerned (MFA 2020b).

To uphold this newly achieved success, it is therefore in the interest of Transnistria to be seen as a reliable partner and a legitimate representative of the Transnistrian population. For that reason, "Transdniestrian authorities try to improve their image in the international arena by creating the appearance of democratic rule" (Isachenko 2008: 358). Two new political parties, Обновление (Obnovleniye, "Renewal") and Республика (Respublika, "The Republic"), were registered in 2006 and 2007 respectively (Blakkisrud & Kolstø 2011: 201). However, scholars are sceptical about the true democratic nature of this system, raising questions about ties with businesses, including the Sheriff conglomerate (ibid.: 202), and stating that "suppression of opposition co-exists with elements of genuine pluralism and competition" (Caspersen 2012: 99). Although a democratisation trend is visible, the authorities are wary for the creation of societal cleavages along ethnic lines. The fragile civic, multi-ethnic sense of national unity that was gradually built in the 1990s could be destroyed by intentionally creating divisions. Such divisions are, however, a prerequisite for democratic pluralism as requested by international actors in their wish to improve human and political rights in Transnistria. Therefore, the political situation in Transnistria in the years after 2005 is best described as "managed pluralism" (Blakkisrud & Kolstø 2011: 203), a legitimisation strategy with the primary goal to ensure “international acceptability” of the regime (Caspersen 2012: 109). Interactions on the international stage are exploited to this end. When then-president Smirnov visited Vladimir Putin in 2006 to discuss recognition, the event was portrayed in the Transnistrian press as two presidents meeting each other, as if his status, and thereby the country’s, had already been recognised (Isachenko 2008: 363).

Another noteworthy event in this period is the foundation of the Community for Democracy and Rights of Nations in 2006. Together with other states with limited recognition, Artsakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Transnistria founded this international organisation, similarly to how recognised states with mutual interests might choose to cooperate multilaterally. One of its modest accomplishments is abolishing visa regimes for its citizens in 2009. This is a policy of limited practical value, as the passports of these states cannot be used for international travel, and citizens will therefore use their Russian or Moldovan passports (Mazur 2014: 145).
Triggered by the independence of Montenegro in 2006, these four abovementioned *de facto* states issued a joint statement on “double standards in relation to states and peoples seeking self-determination” (International Crisis Group 2007: 18). The declared independence of Kosovo and subsequent recognition by a majority of Western states in 2008 revitalised Transnistria’s hopes for recognition (NEWSru 2008).

There is no apparent limit to the scope of policy issues in which Transnistria is willing to comply with international customs. Adherence can be found in uncontroversial fields, such as following the 1968 Vienna Convention on Road Traffic in the design of numberplates

(Matriculas del Mundo 2020), and in more salient issues such as signing the European Anti-Torture Treaty[5].

All these developments, increased engagement with the international community, steps towards internal democratisation, cooperation with other non-recognised states and the incorporation of new states into the international order, have led the Transnistrian authorities to argue that “they have proven their viability as democratic states and thereby earned their sovereignty” (Caspersen 2008: 114; Williams et al. 2015). The impetus for this policy of democratisation has been “the expectation that if Transnistria implements international standards, it will eventually qualify for membership in the international community of states” (Blakkisrud & Kolstø 2011: 205).

Simultaneously, an argument has been voiced internally in which statehood and international recognition are separated from one another. More precisely, an argument in which the former might lead to the latter, but the latter is no prerequisite for the former. As the chair of the Security Committee in the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet (Parliament) put it: “What defines a state? 1. Institutions, 2. territory, 3. population, 4. an economy and a financial system. We have all of these! Statehood doesn’t need to be recognized by the international community. It is sufficient if it is declared by the people themselves.” (Bodnar 2007 in Şveţ 2013: 107).

In summary, Transnistria has gone to great lengths to convince the world it is a serious actor worthy of recognition, but it has been careful to separate its external legitimacy from internal

[5] In full: European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1987. This claim was made by a former representative of the Transnistrian authorities in an interview in January 2020. I could not corroborate this claim.

legitimacy, because the non-materialisation of recognition would subsequently undermine regime legitimacy. However, as part of what Caspersen (2012: 109) calls a “difficult balancing act”, the authorities have realised in a later stage that their limited external legitimacy can be used to strengthen their internal legitimacy and vice versa. This intended symbiosis is the topic of the fourth and last phase.

Phase 4: Synergetic policies

From the 2010s onwards, engagement with Moldova has become increasingly cooperative and decreasingly hostile. Neither the resolution of the conflict, nor the recommencement of violent conflict is likely. Ironically, measures taken by the international community to bring Transnistria and Moldova closer to each other, simultaneously strengthen the Transnistrian regime.

A major threat for the Transnistrian regime is the population decrease as a result of lack of economic opportunities. In the first 20 years, around 200,000 people, roughly 30% of the population in 1990, left the country (Wolff 2012: 14). Simultaneously, a negative trade balance with the size of the country’s GDP evolved (Spartak & Yevchenko 2016: 446). Since “the solution of these problems seems to be critically important for conserving PMR statehood”, the Transnistrian authorities enacted policies from 2012 onwards to turn the tide by fighting against the shadow economy, strengthening fiscal discipline and increasing the population’s real income (ibid.: 448). At least since 2011, the Transnistrian Investment Agency has been working to attract foreign direct investments in various ways, including an annual ‘Pridnestrovian International Investment Economic Forum’ (Wayback Machine 2020).

The 2014 EU-Moldova Association Agreement is likely to have a significant positive effect on Transnistria's and economic situation (Covac 2016: 13), as Moldova was recommended to "enable Transnistria-based economic operators to enjoy the full benefits of the Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area" (Geistlinger 2015: 33). This being said, Transnistria's foreign minister expressed dissatisfaction and worries that the treaty "has become for Moldova a new source of leverage over Pridnestrovie" (Ignatiev in MFA 2015), thus demonstrating the limits to which the EU is willing to engage with Transnistria. Nevertheless, the agreement will have a positive effect on export opportunities for Transnistrian companies willing to pay Moldovan export tariffs.

Another way Transnistria is set to benefit from the increased stability in the region is through tourism. It has started to realise its potential as a destination for niche tourism, as can be seen from the foundation of a tourism agency and the organisation of a tourism conference in late 2019 (Novosti 2019a). For the Transnistrian authorities, the synergetic policy of promoting tourism kills two birds with one stone. Tourism generates an influx of foreign currency, which will strengthen the image of the authorities as capable and hard-working to improve the livelihoods of the population, increasing regime legitimacy. It will also strengthen state legitimacy, as the argument can be made that if many foreigners are willing to travel far to visit Transnistria, there must be something to it.

Externally, it allows Transnistria to state their case for independence to travellers, leading to more international awareness or possibly support (MFA 2020c). Therefore, it is not surprising that the advisor to the president declared that "tourism has to become one of the drivers of the Pridnestrovian economy" (Prokudin in Novosti 2019b).

All the ways the Transnistrian authorities have tried to improve local living conditions by international engagement in the past decade, and thereby its internal legitimacy, risk to be seriously undercut by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Tensions have flared up in early 2020 when, according to Transnistrian sources, Moldova blocked the entry of medical equipment into the country (MFA 2020d). The pandemic is likely to have a lasting negative effect on any state's revenue, and even more so for a *de facto* state that was already in a vulnerable position. These events are however characteristic for a phase that unlike the first three, cannot be exemplified by a single argument for recognition, but has instead revolved around economic survival of the *de facto* state by using any external legitimacy it has already gained.

A typology of phases

In this thesis I have identified four distinct phases in the history of Transnistria, characterised by a focus on acquiring internal or external legitimacy using corresponding arguments. A non-recognised state may have emerged from the rubble of violent conflict justifying its actions by "remedial secession", but if it is to survive in the international system, it will ultimately strive for internal legitimacy by primarily engaging in nation-building, and external legitimacy primarily by state-building. In Transnistria, internal legitimacy took precedence, because due to ethnic diversity a new civic national identity had to be constructed first. Creating a notion of "historical statehood" was the dominant policy at this stage. While this might prove effective to improve internal cohesion, the authorities deemed external recognition more likely when they closely adhered to the rules of the international community and subsequently claimed to have "earned sovereignty". Lastly, the Transnistrian authorities tried, and are trying, to synthesise internally and externally oriented policies. This all can be best depicted in a typology, in which the central arrow indicates the time through which Transnistria passes from one stage to the next.

Typology of legitimisation strategies of Post-Soviet non-recognised states *Applied to Transnistria*			
		Aiming for **external** legitimacy	
		No	Yes
Aiming for **internal** legitimacy	No	• Characterisation: “Cronyism” • Period: 1990-1992 • Main argument: Remedial secession	• Characterisation: “State-building” • Period: 2006-2012 • Main argument: Earned sovereignty
	Yes	• Characterisation: “Nation-building” • Period: 1992-2005 • Main argument: Historical statehood	• Characterisation: “Synergetic policies” • Period: 2012 onwards • No main argument

There are three interconnecting explanations for the progression from one phase to the next, answering the research question “What explains the use of multiple legitimisation strategies by the Transnistrian *de facto* authorities?”.

Firstly, authorities have to reconcile their internal policy objectives with external ones, which can be largely mutually exclusive. The authorities strive to justify their rule externally by claiming moral superiority over the Republic of Moldova, but have to do so without internally disenfranchising the approximately 30 % of their citizens who self-identify as Moldovan (Dembińska 2019).

Secondly, strategies are strongly influenced by geo-political and socio-economic developments in their recent past. An argument of earned sovereignty mere months after the conception of the state is unlikely to be effective. Similarly, decades after the last violent clashes arguments revolving around remedial secession move to the background. Furthermore, nation-building endeavours take time, and have to be developed within constraints in human resources and money. This is especially true in an ethnically diverse state. Therefore, claims of historical statehood have to be justifiable with national myths, histories and folklore before they can be convincingly argued.
A related point is the impact of external developments. The international recognition of a ‘fellow’ *de facto* state, an increase in the willingness of international organisations to engage with Transnistria directly, or changes in the economic power of the patron state (Russia) and parent state (Moldova), all influence the authorities’ incentives.

Lastly, these strategies should not be analysed separately. Rather, they exist in relationship to each other. As time progresses, more refined arguments can be voiced that build upon prior arguments, without those earlier arguments completely disappearing. The effectiveness of policies can be evaluated by the authorities and policies will be adapted to changing local and international circumstances. Over time, an internally cohesive body of arguments, national myths and state-building practices is formed by nation-builders who aim to provide legitimisation to the case of Transnistria's independence and international recognition.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to explain the use of multiple legitimisation strategies by the Transnistrian *de facto* authorities. Strategies consist of policies with matching arguments, of which this thesis discusses three, based on the literature: "remedial secession", "historical statehood" and "earned sovereignty". Making a fundamental distinction between internal and external legitimacy, this thesis finds evidence for four distinct phases in Transnistria's history which are characterised by strategies that focus on either of these types of legitimacy, or both, or neither. A typology in which all four phases with accompanying characteristics are summarised is this thesis' main contribution to the literature.

The thesis gives three interconnecting explanations for the use of multiple strategies. Internal and external legitimacy are equally important but fundamentally different goals that require a different strategy. Changing local and international circumstances affect which strategies the Transnistrian authorities consider worthwhile. Lastly, earlier strategies are built upon with later, more elaborate arguments and refined policies, as Transnistrian state- and nation-building practices develop.

An informed reader will be able to find ample examples of policies that do not fit the model. State-building endeavours did not commence only in 2006. Indeed, there had to be state institutions in the 1990s to effectively develop nation-building policies. However, the authorities of a small, non-recognised state have to prioritise their goals. The typology therefore intends to capture the dominant policy of the time, which the authorities deemed most effective in legitimising the state's existence.

Future researchers could refine the typology by finding a main argument for the fourth phase, as recent events, such as the EU-Moldova Association Agreement and the COVID-19 pandemic, are likely to affect Transnistrian recognition strategies. Another avenue for future research is testing the generalisability and explaining potential of the typology, by applying it to other non-recognised states. Fellow post-Soviet states are a logical place to start, as they share most characteristics in causally relevant dimensions.

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