**Recognition, Status Quo or Reintegration: Engagement with De Facto States**

ABSTRACT

De facto states and their parent states usually have very different reasons for backing engagement policies, based on their respective claims to self-determination and territorial integrity. Drawing on four case studies - Abkhazia, Transnistria, Nagorno Karabakh, and Northern Cyprus – this article examines how this underlying tension is negotiated. It demonstrates the need to distinguish between different forms of engagement and finds that engagement is significantly constrained by parent state insistence on territorial integrity. Yet the issue of status can sometimes be fudged, depending on the degree of patron state support for the de facto state and its commitment to independence.

KEY WORDS: De facto states, Engagement, Territorial Integrity, Self-determination

Engagement with de facto states is frequently recommended as a conflict resolution devise. Interactions are intended to moderate popular attitudes, reduce the influence of patron states, and increase leverage over the de facto authorities (see e.g. Cooley & Mitchell, 2010, Fischer, 2010, De Waal, 2017). The hope is that this will eventually pave the way for a solution in the form of a negotiated settlement. The EU’s “Non-Recognition and Engagement” policy for Georgia’s breakaway regions was, for example, presented as part of the EU’s approach to “conflict resolution and confidence-building” (Fischer, 2010, p. 1) and its objectives of “de-isolation and diversification of narratives” were described as “a pre-condition for the long-term goal of conflict resolution” (Ibid. p. 3). For the parent state, such a solution means the reintegration of the contested territory, i.e. the restoration of its territorial integrity. This is the framework under which de-isolation is deemed acceptable. For example, the Cypriot Government accepted engagement with Turkish Cypriot institutions as a means to prepare the ground for reunification.[[1]](#footnote-1) To emphasise this link, they insisted that the bicommunal technical committees created for this purpose had to be part of the formal peace process.[[2]](#footnote-2) Similarly, the Georgian Government launched its engagement strategy with the explicit purpose of achieving “the full deoccupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia” and enable the peaceful reintegration of “these territories and their populations into Georgia’s constitutional ambit” (Government of Georgia, 2010, p. 1). However, this view of engagement is not shared by most de facto states. Their objective is usually the exact opposite: to consolidate their de facto independence and increase the prospect for international recognition (Caspersen, 2015).

In order to bridge this divide, interactions with the de facto states are often said to “sidestep the issue of recognition”[[3]](#footnote-3), or take place “without prejudice to legal status”.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, the tension between territorial integrity and self-determination cannot always be sidestepped. The EU’s engagement policy with the Georgian breakaway regions is explicitly a policy of *non-recognition* and engagement. These interactions take place despite of, or in the context of, continued support for the parent state’s territorial integrity. Moreover, engagement comes with constraints and very definite red lines, in particular when it comes to engagement with de facto authorities and public institutions (see e.g. De Waal, 2017). This raises the question of how the tension between territorial integrity and self-determination is negotiated, the form of engagement that results, and the preparedness of de facto states to fudge their claim to independent statehood.

The leaders of de facto states typically insist that their demand for independence, their right to (external) self-determination, is non-negotiable (Caspersen, 2012). But in the absence of widespread recognition, they need engagement in order to strengthen the status quo and ensure their continued survival. Maintaining de facto independence, rebuilding infrastructure, and building state-institutions require resources. Otherwise de facto states are left unable to provide their populations with public goods, which will impact on their domestic legitimacy (Bakke, et al., 2014), increase the risk of large-scale emigration, and could render the entity unable to defend itself (see e.g. Kolstø & Paukovic, 2014; Caspersen, 2012). The resources needed by de facto states most often come from a patron state, which in some cases supplies the majority of the entity’s budget and also provides crucial links to the outside world (see e.g. Ó Beacháin, et al., 2016, p. 443; Grono, 2016). Such reliance is however not cost-free. Firstly, dependence on patron states could undermine their de facto independence and case for international recognition, and de facto states typically go out of their way to present patron state involvement as pragmatic and transitional (see e.g. Bakke, et al., 2017, p. 4).Secondly,patron state support is associated with vulnerability: a patron state may, for strategic reasons or otherwise, choose to reduce or even cease its support altogether. It is telling that surveys conducted in Abkhazia and Transnistria find popular backing for Russia’s support, but also a lack of faith in its continuation (Toal & O’Loughlin, 2016). De facto states therefore have a strong incentive to diversify their resource base and even de facto states with extensive patron state support seek wider international engagement. The president of Abkhazia, Raul Khajimba, stated in an interview, “the Russian Federation supports us as an ally and a major strategic partner...We are very grateful. But at the same time, we are making every effort to build a self-sufficient economy... We are actively working on the establishment of new relations with those states which have not yet recognized us” (Royle, 2016). In the case of Nagorno Karabakh, the authorities are arguing that they have overcome their “non-recognition complex” and are prioritising the strengthening of the status quo (Caspersen, 2015). But making the status quo attractive, and thereby sustainable, necessitates links with the outside world. A recent survey suggested that 70 pct. of the population were ready to leave Nagorno Karabakh (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 15).

There is also a widespread belief in de facto states that engagement will increase the prospect of recognition. Not just because it would counteract the image of a puppet, but because it would normalise the de facto separation, create more effective entities, and foster bilateral links that could, over time, make states more willing to recognise the de facto situation. Engagement and recognition are typically seen as mutually supportive, not as either-or (Caspersen, 2015). The president of Abkhazia argues that engagement will increase international awareness of Abkhazia and its struggle for independence and therefore believes that “the establishment of international relations and contacts on the cultural, educational, sports and other levels may contribute to the recognition of our country” (Royle, 2016). But how can this need for external links be reconciled with the engagement strategies, motivations and constraints coming from the parent state and the international community, which are predicated on the need to restore territorial integrity?

Although there is a growing literature on engagement with de facto states (see e.g. Berg & Kuusk, 2010; Cooley & Mitchell, 2010; Ker-Lindsay, 2015; Berg & Scott, 2016), there is a lack of analysis of how engagement is shaped, and not simply blocked, by parent state resistance and by the overall framework of territorial integrity. We also lack knowledge of de facto state resistance to engagement, and of how the space between territorial integrity and self-determination is negotiated as part of this process. Through an analysis of four case studies - Abkhazia (Georgia), Nagorno Karabakh (Azerbaijan), Northern Cyprus and Transnistria (Moldova) - this article examines obstacles to engagement with de facto states, in particular the constraints posed by opposing positions on self-determination and territorial integrity. The article first unpacks and refines the concept of engagement, arguing that resistance to engagement differs significantly depending on whether it is with the parent state or with the wider international community, and whether it takes the form of ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ engagement. The article then examines parent state resistance to, certain forms of, engagement and the resulting constraints put in place. This is followed by an analysis of the reactions of de facto states: are they willing to fudge their claim to self-determination in order to establish links with the outside world? The analysis finds that the tension between territorial integrity and self-determination significantly limits engagement policies, even if the room for pragmatism is greater than we might assume. Issues of sovereignty and statehood can to some extent be fudged, but the willingness of de facto states to accept the constrained forms of engagement on offer is found to depend on two factors: the goal of the de facto state and the degree of support it receives from a patron state. By further developing the concept of engagement and by analysing how the tension between territorial integrity and self-determination affects the engagement policies adopted by both parent and de facto states, this article makes a conceptual and an empirical contribution to the emerging literature on engagement with de facto states.

**Conflicting Meanings of Engagement**

Engagement is usually conceived of as any form of interaction between de facto states and recognised states or between de facto states and international organisations (see e.g. Ker-Lindsay, 2015; Berg & Pegg, 2016). It is a form of catch-all term that covers a range of links between the contested territory and the outside world, albeit usually not links between the de facto states and their patrons. But in order to fully analyse obstacles to engagement, we need to unpack the concept.

Engagement with de facto states comes in two main forms: interactions with the parent state and interactions with the wider international community.

Hardly any de facto states are completely isolated and many benefit from international engagement, in the form of humanitarian aid, travel, educational exchanges, trade and even some diplomatic links. However, we do find significant variation between de facto states (see e.g. Berg & Kuusk, 2010). At one end of the international engagement spectrum, we find Somaliland where the UN, the EU, the US and other recognised states have cooperated intensively with the de facto authorities, especially on issues related to security and counterterrorism (Pegg & Kolstø, 2015, p. 199). At the other end of the spectrum, we find Nagorno Karabakh which has hardly any interactions with recognised states and international organisations, and whose international linkages largely consist of financial support and investments by the Armenian diaspora (see e.g. Ó Beacháin, et al., 2016).

Direct engagement with the international community is the type of engagement we would expect de facto states to prioritise. It provides them with much needed resources and links to the outside world. Moreover it does not suggest a hierarchical relationship with the parent state, and implies an acceptance of these entities as members of the international community. However, there are significant obstacles to such engagement. Firstly, it is most likely to be offered to de facto states that are seen as strategically important (Pegg & Berg, 2016; Berg & Pegg, 2016). Although de facto states can play up their strategic position and their willingness to act as a reliable partner, they cannot alter their geographic position (Caspersen, 2015). Secondly, the parent state will in many cases act as an effective gatekeeper and go out its way to oppose such engagement (Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Caspersen, 2015), which they are worried could lead to “creeping recognition”. Certain forms of interactions, or the sum of interactions, could be seen to imply recognition of the de facto state. As Ker-Lindsay (2015, p. 284) has pointed out, recognition “cannot be accidental… As long as a state insists that it does not recognize a territory as independent, and does not take steps that obviously amount to recognition—such as the establishment of formal diplomatic relations through the appointment of an ambassador or the establishment of an embassy—then it does not do so.” International recognition, in a legal sense, does not creep. Yet this concern is widely shared by governments involved in separatist conflicts, including the governments of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Cyprus (see e.g. De Waal, 2017).

When parent states talk about engagement, what they refer to is usually strikingly different. They focus on links between the parent state and the population of the contested territory. Such engagement between the de facto state and the parent state, in most cases, represents a continuation of pre-conflict links and supplies. For example, the Sri Lankan state continued to provide health and education within Tamil Eelam (Caspersen, 2012) and Georgian health care is accessible to Abkhaz if they travel across the de facto border (De Waal, 2017). Some cultural and sports links may also persist. For example, Transnistria’s FC Sheriff plays in the Moldovan football league, and has represented Moldova in the UEFA Europa League (Glennon, 2016). This form of engagement could be seen to simply reflect the parent state’s insistence on its territorial integrity: it remains legally responsible for the welfare of all its citizens. However, new links are also sometimes created, either out of practical necessity, such as when the UNDP created a single sewage system in Nicosia, or within a framework of conflict resolution (see e.g. Government of Georgia, 2010; Fischer 2010). Engagement as a conflict resolution devise has been used most prominently in the case of Cyprus where exchanges between the two sides have gradually increased, since the Green Line was opened in 2003. Engagement was further stepped up with the creation of seven bicommunal technical committees in 2008 and the later addition of four further committees.[[5]](#footnote-5) The three Georgian/Abkhaz working groups on security problems, refugees and internally displaced persons, and social and economic problems, which were established in 1997, served a similar confidence-building purpose (Wolleh, 2006, p. 19), while the Georgian Government’s “State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation” was intended to “promote interaction among the divided populations of Georgia” and thereby pave the way for peaceful reintegration (Government of Georgia, 2010, p. 1-2). This second form of engagement is less popular with de facto states. As Blakkisrud and Kolstø (2011: 191) argued, when analysing Transnistria’s extensive links with its parent state, it could lead to charges that their independence is “imagined” (see also Caspersen, 2015).

Engagement comes in different forms and de facto states and parent states typically have very different things in mind when they call for such links. The concept as used by de facto states is predicated on their claim to self-determination, while parent states link it closely to the principle of territorial integrity. When analysing obstacles to engagement, we should therefore distinguish between these two forms of engagement: engagement with the parent state and engagement with the wider international community. But the analysis will show that the former can also meet considerable resistance from parent states, depending on the form it takes. Within the two broad types of engagement, we find a number of sub-categories. Engagement can, for example, refer to activities as varied as diplomacy, trade, education, health, and freedom of movement; and it can refer to contacts between populations, private companies, or authorities. These forms of engagement relate in different ways to sovereignty and vary in their effects on statehood. In order to capture this, we should distinguish between engagement with individuals and with institutions, and between what could be termed hard and soft engagement. Hard engagement refers to links that build state capacity, i.e. that assist with the building of de facto state institutions, whereas soft engagement refers to links not directly strengthening the de facto authorities such as educational exchanges. The type of engagement matters when it comes to the level of resistance we can expect, from the parent state and from the de facto state: does the engagement imply acceptance of the de facto state as an equal partner; does it assist state-building efforts? However, as will be shown below, the lines can be blurred, despite the frequent insistence by both parent states and de facto states that there are clear red lines.

While parent state objections to engagement are fairly well-established (see e.g. Ker-Lindsay, 2012), I am not aware of any in-depth analysis of how parent states try to navigate these perceived constraints. Some analysts have examined the willingness of de facto states to engage with their parent state (e.g. Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011; Ó Beacháin et al 2016), but there has been no systematic analysis of de facto states responses, and no detailed analysis of their responses to international engagement.[[6]](#footnote-6) The remainder of this article will focus on the obstacles to different forms of engagement, how this affects the type of engagement that we find in most cases, and its effect on the de facto states.

**Case Studies and Data**

The empirical analysis consists of four case studies: Abkhazia (Georgia), Nagorno Karabakh (Azerbaijan), Northern Cyprus, and Transnistria (Moldova). These four cases all enjoy support from a patron state: Russia in the case of Abkhazia and Transnistria, Armenia in Nagorno Karabakh, and Turkey in Northern Cyprus. However, the extent and form of this support differs: Russia has recognised the independence of Abkhazia, but not of Transnistria; Turkey has recognised Northern Cyprus’ independence, while Armenia has yet to recognise its client state. The four cases also differ when it comes to their declared goal and the degree of ambiguity surrounding this goal. Abkhazia only declared independence in 1999, five years after it had secured de facto independence, and until the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, there were still actors who, at least in private, would contemplate reintegration into the Georgian state (Caspersen, 2008). Abkhazia now clearly demands independence, but its heavy reliance on Russia is causing tensions and internal divisions (see e.g. International Crisis Group 2010). The official goal of Nagorno Karabakh has since 1991 been independent statehood, but the original demand was for unification with Armenia and roughly half of the population still favour this outcome (Toal & O’Loughlin, 2016, p. 120). Transnistria has, like the other post-Soviet cases, declared independence, but in a 2006 referendum its voters also supported Transnistria’s “subsequent free unification with the Russian Federation” and the Transnistrian parliament in 2014 appealed to the Russian President to be accepted into the Russian Federation (Kolstø, 2014). When an independent Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was proclaimed in 1983, the official goal remained a federal Cyprus.[[7]](#footnote-7) Since then its leaders have oscillated between those two goals, but its population accepted reintegration in the 2004 referendum on the Annan Plan. Finally, the four cases differ considerably when it comes to their level of engagement with both their parent state and the wider international community. Nagorno Karabakh is the most isolated, followed by Abkhazia, Transnistria and Northern Cyprus.

The analysis draws on secondary sources, statements made by the authorities (de facto and de jure), policy documents, and interviews conducted with Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot officials. Northern Cyprus is the case where different “red lines” on engagement have been most extensively explored and negotiated, and interviews allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the obstacles encountered.

**Parent State Resistance to Engagement and Its Effects**

Although parent state opposition to international engagement vary, the following analysis shows that such engagement will almost always be curtailed. When the leaders of the four parent states refer to engagement what they tend to mean is linkages between the parent state and the population of the de facto state, or at least engagement *through* the parent state. Engagement with institutions is usually resisted and ‘hard’ engagement is hardly ever on the table.

*International Engagement*

Azerbaijan is the parent state that goes furthest in preventing any form of international engagement with its breakaway region. This insistence on isolating Nagorno Karabakh came to international attention when a Russian/Israeli blogger was extradited from Belarus and charged with visiting the contested territory (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 11). Azerbaijan’s prosecutor is also reported to have launched an investigation into foreign companies suspected of “illegal economic activities” in Karabakh (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 11). The intention behind this “hands-off policy” is to isolate Nagorno Karabakh, thereby ensuring that non-recognition comes at a cost, prevent the normalisation of the de facto separation, and possibly “give Baku a chance to re-conquer its lost territories through war” (Berg, 2015, p. 4).

Georgia is generally more open to international engagement with its breakaway regions. Shortly after the EU launched its Non-recognition and Engagement policy, it adopted its own engagement strategy (Government of Georgia 2010). However, international engagement is circumscribed by the “Law on Occupied Territories”, which forbids any economic activity with Abkhazia without the written authorization of the Georgian government; declares all de facto authorities illegal; and requires international organizations intending to work in Abkhazia to coordinate closely with the Georgian authorities (De Waal, 2017).[[8]](#footnote-8) Although the EU insists that it pursues activities in the contested territories “in consultation with the Georgian authorities, but not in full coordination with them” (Ibid.), its engagement policy has clearly been made difficult by Georgian concerns over capacity-building, even over something as seemingly innocuous as teacher training.[[9]](#footnote-9) When it comes to wider international engagement, Georgia has used “aggressive diplomatic measures” to prevent multinational companies from opening branches in Abkhazia (Ó Beacháin, et al., 2016, p. 454). For example, when a Turkish distributor of the Italian brand Benetton opened a shop in Abkhazia, the Georgian Minister for Foreign Affairs called in the Turkish ambassador and threatened the company with sanctions (Ibid.).

The Moldovan government has been significantly more accepting of international engagement with Transnistria, but it also has its “red lines”. This is illustrated in the controversies that resulted when Transnistria signed up to Moldova’s commitments under its free trade agreement with the EU. This resulted in disputes over the international status of diplomas from Transnistria’s university and of Transnistrian license plates. The Moldovan government was reportedly unwilling to show any flexibility, and was bolstered by the signing of a public letter by several dozen experts and civil society leaders which opposed any moves on Transnistria that did not follow “an explicit agenda of reintegrating the breakaway territory” (De Waal, 2016).

Engagement is also constrained by parent state concerns in the case of Cyprus, even if the Cypriot Government sees links with the North, including capacity-building on the other side of the Green Line, as a strategy for promoting reunification. The Cypriot Government has been adamant that this engagement is part of the settlement talks, but still insists on quite significant limitations. These restrictions are designed to avoid normalising and legitimising the status quo, but also to ensure that non-recognition has a cost and reunification can therefore be presented as a carrot.[[10]](#footnote-10) After the Turkish Cypriot support for the Annan Plan, which was rejected by the majority of the Greek Cypriot population, the EU promised increased engagement with the Turkish Cypriots. However, instead of direct international engagement, the EU has continued to require the consent of the Cypriot Government for Green Line regulation and for financial support, and direct trade or direct flights have not been established.[[11]](#footnote-11)

International engagement tends to be strongly opposed by parent states. If they do accept such engagement, they insist that it happens within an explicit framework of conflict resolution and territorial integrity, and with limits on capacity-building. Perhaps more surprisingly, links between the parent state and the de facto state are also often resisted.

*Engagement with the Parent State*

When it comes to engagement with the parent state, we again encounter significant variation, but also similar concerns and restrictions. At the most isolationist end of the spectrum, we again find Azerbaijan. The de facto border (the Line of Contact) is hermetically sealed and it is an offence for Azerbaijani citizens to travel to Nagorno Karabakh, which is regarded as occupied territory. The Azerbaijan government is also refusing to implement confidence-building along the Line of Contact, fearing that it will cement the status quo (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 22). Any measures that are seen to “prolong or strengthen the status quo, or extend the legitimacy of the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh” are strongly opposed (Paul & Sammut, 2016, p. 3).

Engagement with Abkhazia has been the subject of heated domestic debate in Georgia, with opposition parties alleging that engagement is a concession to Russia (De Waal, 2017). Opponents of engagement fear that it will “cement de facto realities on the ground” and leave no incentives for the contested territories to reintegrate (Grono, 2016). However, the Georgian Government has an explicit policy of engagement, and attitudes have become more permissive since the Georgian Dream government came to power in 2012, and we now see fairly strong low-level economic activity across the de facto border (De Waal, 2017). Abkhaz also cross into Georgian-controlled territory to gain access to health care and Georgia is planning to open a new clinic for 220 patients close to the de facto border (Jardine, 2017). Nevertheless, continued controversy surrounding the engagement policy prompted the Public Defender of Georgia, Ucha Nanuashvili (2017), to issue this defence: “people living in the occupied territories are citizens of Georgia... It is thus the obligation of the state to support the local population, be it through funding healthcare” or “ensuring access to quality education.” He insisted that, “caring for the rights and needs of the people living in the occupied territories points directly to the legitimacy and fairness of Georgia’s claims to territorial integrity.”

We find even greater levels of engagement in the two final cases: Transnistria and Northern Cyprus. Thousands of vehicles cross the de facto border between Transnistria and Moldova every day and Transnistrian newspapers are sold in Chisinau kiosks (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2010: 112-3). As part of conflict resolution efforts in 1996, Moldova allowed Transnistrian export companies to use Moldovan customs certificates, thereby enabling them to engage with licit trade with the outside world. However since 2006, Transnistrian companies have had to register in Moldova to obtain these certificates (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011 p. 190-1).

In Cyprus, the decade since the Annan Plan witnessed a considerable increase in contacts and trade across the Green Line. A significant number of Turkish Cypriots now work in the South and trade worth €52million has crossed from North to South as of the end of 2017.[[12]](#footnote-12) But significant constraints have been imposed by the Cypriot Government. These contacts are for example based on individuals, not institutions, and certainly not the de facto authorities - although the leaders of the two sides did meet in the settlement talks, as representatives of their respective communities. This ban on institutional engagement even extends to school exchanges. Other red lines seem more arbitrary. For example, commercial vehicles over 7t are prohibited from crossing the Green Line, due to non-recognition of MOT certificates issues by the TRNC, but private vehicles, subject to the same MOT process, are permitted.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Parent states that recognise the need for engagement with de facto states will usually insist on a number of conditions. Firstly, this engagement is presented as a means to enabling or facilitating future reintegration. Secondly, parent states almost always insist that international engagement goes through them or has their explicit acceptance. Thirdly, engagement with public institutions in the contested territories is severely constrained, and contacts with the de facto foreign ministries is always rejected. Fourthly, ‘hard’ engagement, i.e. any form of engagement that is seen to involve capacity-building, is usually strongly opposed.

However, what is notable is that the interpretation of these red lines differs from case to case. For example, Transnistrian companies have to use Moldovan custom stamps and be registered in Moldova to export their goods, while Turkish Cypriot goods can be accompanied by a document issued by the Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce. The latter predates Turkey’s military intervention in 1974 and is therefore not viewed as illegal and it has been ‘duly authorised for that purpose by the European Commission in agreement with the Government of the Republic of Cyprus’.[[14]](#footnote-14) This demonstrates that there is some space for pragmatism, and for fudging sovereignty, but also a determination on part of the parent state to avoid the implication that de facto states are of equal standing to the recognised state. The parent states worry about ‘creeping recognition’ but also what Cypriot officials often refer to as “Taiwanisation” or the consolidation of the status quo. This may not lead to recognition, at least not in the short term, but it will make reintegration harder to achieve. We therefore see a consistent strategy to impose a hierarchical relationship and avoid a normalisation of the de facto separation, and consequently a clear framework of territorial integrity.

**De Facto State Resistance**

As a result of parent state objections, the line between engagement with the wider international community and with the parent state is sometimes blurred, or the former may depend on the de facto state renouncing its ambitions for independence, at least implicitly. This could for example entail the acceptance of parent state customs stamps, as noted above, or the de facto authorities can only attend international meetings as individuals or as community representatives. However, if international engagement has to go through the parent state, or be approved by it, it implies a hierarchical relationship, and could therefore be seen to undermine the entity’s claim to independence. Such engagement may well be rejected by the de facto state, or cause significant internal resistance. Two factors are expected to be particularly important for the willingness of de facto states to accept such constrained engagement: their commitment to the goal of independence, and the level of support they receive from a patron state.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*Engagement with the Parent State*

If the creation of a de facto state is essentially a bargaining chip, a means to ensuring wide-ranging reforms of the existing state, then we would expect less resistance to engagement with, or through, the parent state. The TRNC’s declaration of independence still referred to the goal of creating a bi-zonal federal Cyprus.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, independence became the favoured option of the TRNC’s first president, Rauf Denktas, and he consequently emphasised the entity’s right to self-determination, the illegitimacy of the Republic of Cyprus, and the need for separation (see e.g. Christou, 2015). As a result, resistance to bicommunal contacts initially came from the de facto authorities rather than the parent state. In fact, Denktas prohibited bicommunal meetings, since he argued that these were being exploited by the Greek Cypriot side to promote its government internationally as the sole representative of the Cypriot people (Constantinou & Papadakis, 2001). In this case we therefore also see a fear of implied recognition: a fear that engagement with the parent state would imply that the de facto authorities recognise the Republic of Cyprus as the only state in Cyprus. As a result, the Turkish Cypriot right-wing deemed such contacts to be ‘treacherous’ (Ibid.). An additional reason for this opposition to engagement was the official TRNC rhetoric that emphasised past animosity between the two communities and stressed the need for separation. Bicommunal meetings were consequently regarded as contact with the enemy, with the aggressor (Ibid. p. 140-1). When the Green Line was opened, Denktas reportedly expected violence and may even have been trying to mandate it,[[17]](#footnote-17) as this would have reinforced his position against reunification. Following the change in the TRNC leadership and the more unambiguous pursuit of a federal solution, this direct resistance to engagement disappeared. However some constraints remain. For example, when forest fires broke out in the North, the Cypriot Government offered help but this was refused by the Turkish Cypriot administration. ‘Help was accepted following a serious oil spill, but the chemicals needed had to be sold via the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry’, as there could be no direct transaction between the de facto authorities and the Cypriot Government.[[18]](#footnote-18) We still find an insistence on being recognised as an equal party. Thus when the TRNC leaders accept taking part in settlement talks as community representatives, they insist that the representatives of the (recognised) Cypriot Government do the same.

In de facto states that are unambiguously committed to independence, we find even greater resistance to engagement, especially if the de facto state also enjoys significant patron state support. Abkhazia has been recognised by Russia and receives very substantial military and economic support from its patron. It is therefore less desperate for other sources of support and can afford to be more rigid and refuse engagement with, or through, the parent state. This is even the case when Georgia has tried to fudge the issue of status. For example, there was hardly any take-up when Tbilisi launched so-called status-neutral travel documents. This was intended to break the isolation faced by Abkhazia’s residents, and the dependence on Russia, but one major practical problem was that such a document could only be acquired by travelling to Georgian-controlled territory and this is politically or socially difficult for most Abkhaz (De Waal, 2017). Mistrust of Tbilisi’s intentions appears to have been another factor. Participants in a focus group study - which included representatives from government, opposition and civil society - argued that since these documents carried a special code, signifying that the holder was resident in Abkhazia, it would allow Georgia to regulate and control their contacts with the outside world (Kvarchelia, 2012, p. 15). Similar concerns were raised over Georgian proposals to set up a special fund to regulate the international funding of projects in Abkhazia. The fear was that this would enable the Georgian government to control and supervise the work of international organisations in Abkhazia. The focus group participants argued that Abkhazia must deal directly with Brussels and stressed the need for an EU regional office in Abkhazia, “because Abkhazia will not deal with the EU representatives in Georgia” (Kvarchelia, 2012, p. 8). There is resistance to any form of engagement that implies a hierarchical relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia or gives the parent state control over activities in the de facto state.

The Nagorno Karabakh authorities have largely been denied any opportunity for engagement. However, there are indications what their red lines would be if such interactions were offered. For example, the website of the Nagorno Karabakh office in Washington DC notes that the Karabakh authorities have “called to eliminate the atmosphere of hostility and hatred in the region by a joint realization of minor projects of mutual benefit,” but argues that such initiatives have been turned down by Azerbaijan. However, it is also emphasised that any conflict resolution initiatives must take into account “the realities in place”; i.e. Karabakh’s de facto independence (Office of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, 2017a). Moreover, Azerbaijani proposals for promoting relations between the Armenian Karabakh community and the Azerbaijani Karabakh community, who were displaced by the conflict, have been refused (Paul & Sammut, 2016, p. 3). Based on Nagorno Karabakh’s unambiguous goal of de jure separation from Azerbaijan and significant support from its patron, and from the sizeable Armenian diaspora, we would expect Karabakh to resist any form of engagement that implies willingness to compromise on status.

Although Russia provides support for Transnistria, it is on a much lower scale than the kind of patron state support we see in Nagorno Karabakh and, in particular, Abkhazia. Russia does not recognise Transnistria and crucially does not share a land border with the entity. Transnistria can also not rely on support from a diaspora population. This relative international isolation helps explain the greater pragmatism regarding engagement that we find in this case, despite the Transnistrian authorities’ continued rejection of reintegration. The de facto authorities initially opposed the requirement for Transnistrian export companies to register in Moldova in order to obtain customs certificates, describing it as a blockade (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011, p. 191). However, they were forced to compromise with the Moldovan government “in order to maintain an active flow of exports for its industry-based economy” (Ó Beacháin, et al., 2016, p. 449). The Transnistrian authorities have, as noted above, also signed on to Moldova’s free-trade agreement with the EU. This implies a hierarchical relationship that their counterparts in Abkhazia would be unwilling to accept.

Whereas the parent states are afraid of creeping recognition, de facto states fear that engagement could lead to ‘creeping reintegration’, i.e. that it would undermine the case for separation. After all, how threatening is the parent state if people can travel freely, work and use public provisions across the de facto border? And how real is the proclaimed independence, if the parent state can dictate the terms of international engagement? Another problem is the vulnerability that could result from extensive links with the parent state. Such links could well be cut off, especially as they are likely to meet opposition in the parent state. It should therefore be no surprise that engagement is not universally popular with de facto states, or its popularity very much depends on the form it takes.

*Direct International Engagement*

Direct links with international organisations and recognized states is usually what de facto states mean when they talk about engagement. For example the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus has been lobbying for the EU Council to keep its 2004 promise to “put an end to the isolation of the Turkish Cypriot community and to facilitate the unification of Cyprus by encouraging the economic development of the Turkish Cypriot community” (Talmon, n.d.) and has pushed for the establishment of direct trade and direct flights with the EU.[[19]](#footnote-19) Such international links would help de facto states build capacity and thereby consolidate their de facto independence. But international engagement is not just about capacity-building. Such interactions also imply that the de facto states are members of the international community, and not subordinated to their parent states. In other words, the authorities want the de facto state to be treated as a (recognised) state. Recognised states are able to establish trade links with their neighbours and they also take part in international forums; not just inter-governmental ones, but also sports and commercial gatherings. This explains the enthusiasm with which de facto states take part in seemingly unimportant international events. For example when a delegation from the Abkhaz Chamber of Commerce recently took part in an international tourism exhibition, they described their participation as “phenomenal” and noted that the catalogue presented Abkhazia alongside and on par with recognised states (Abkhaz World, 2017). The Abkhaz president similarly lauded Abkhazia’s hosting of the Domino World Championship (Royle, 2016). These events are insignificant from the point of view of capacity-building, but they may serve to normalise the separation from the parent state. Finally, there are more emotive reasons for seeking engagement. The denial of access to the wider international community is seen as humiliating, as a denial of legitimacy. The speaker of the TRNC parliament describes it as “an embargo on my voice” and speaks of her humiliation when asked to leave a meeting of the Inter Parliamentary Union, following a complaint by the representatives of the Cypriot parliament.[[20]](#footnote-20) Grono (2016) similarly reports how Abkhaz “from all walks of life…spoke of frustration at exclusion from the Europe they feel they belong to”.

But resistance to engagement may extend to direct international engagement. Abkhaz focus group participants pointed to the EU’s discourse of “reconciliation” and “confidence-building measures” and expressed concern that the engagement strategy is conducted within the framework of the Georgian “re-integration” and “de-occupation” strategies (Kvarchelia, 2012, p. 15). Some argued that the EU’s engagement strategy must be separate from Georgia’s reintegration objective, whereas others went further and argued that engagement with the EU should be rejected unless the EU supports Abkhazia’s right to self-determination: “Let them recognise us first. We are not going to be fooled by their ‘economic carrots” (Kvarchelia, 2012, p. 7). An additional reason for Abkhaz opposition to EU engagement is its focus on humanitarian programmes rather than structural development (Berg, 2015, p. 5). A senior official criticised the lack of international willingness to build capacity in Abkhazia: “They [the West] have built a modern oncology centre in Tbilisi; why can’t they do the same here? Why should our people face the choice of either going to Tbilisi for treatment or dying?” (Kvarchelia, 2012, p. 8). The Abkhaz resistance is focused on engagement that is explicitly based on the goal of future reintegration with Georgia, or which implies an unequal status between Georgia and Abkhazia, for example by not offering ‘hard’ engagement. This does not mean that the Abkhaz government and wider society have no interest in international engagement. It still seeks international recognition and sees engagement as a way to further this goal (see e.g. Kvarchelia, 2012; Royle, 2016).

The above analysis has suggested that resistance from de facto states to engagement with or through the parent state is significantly affected by two key factors. Firstly, the goal of the de facto states - are they set on full independence or prepared to countenance some form of reintegration? Secondly, the degree of patron state support, which affects the extent to which de facto states need external interactions and therefore their willingness to accept limitations imposed by the parent state. Support from a patron state can also have a more direct effect on engagement. De Waal (2017) finds that growing Russian assertiveness has narrowed the space for EU engagement in Abkhazia. This is likely one reason for the decision by the EU to channel most of its activities in Abkhazia through the UNDP and the International Red Cross. However, the role of international NGOs has also decreased (Ó Beacháin, et al., 2016) and there are signs that Russia is trying to prevent engagement with Georgia. For example, Russia and Abkhazia have signed an agreement which allows Abkhaz with Russian citizenship to use Russian medical services. This is seen as an attempt to lure Abkhaz patients away from the parent state (Jardine, 2017).

**Effects of Constrained Engagement**

De facto states are therefore faced with an international community that is unlikely to engage with them, unless they have strategic interests in the contested territory or the parent state accepts engagement as a conflict resolution measure. In the latter case, the engagement is likely to come with significant constraints: international engagement has to go through the parent state, or be subject to its explicit approval, and interactions are often limited to individuals or community representatives and does not include what I have termed ‘hard’ engagement.

Some de facto states are willing to downplay their claim to independence, in order to gain access to international engagement. It has already been described how Transnistria accepts that their companies register in Chisinau and trade with Moldovan customs stamp. This pragmatism when it comes to statehood can be even more wide-ranging. Bryant (n.d.) argues that in order to benefit from “engagement without recognition”, Turkish Cypriots have had to disavow their state. Engagement “is possible only through the inverted comma hand gesture that insists that we do not believe in the “state’s” sovereignty” (Ibid. p. 22). However, many de facto states are unwilling to use even metaphorical inverted commas. As I mentioned above, the Abkhaz leadership is adamant that they are treated as equal to Georgia and highlight every time this happens, even if the occasion is something as seemingly unimportant as a tourism convention. In other cases, most notably Nagorno Karabakh, engagement is simply not being offered, due to parent state resistance, or is limited to a few civil society initiatives. In these cases, the de facto states tend to employ two strategies: Firstly, a general attempt to persuade recognised states to engage with them, despite parent state objections. Secondly, more targeted efforts to create international links that are less constrained by fears of implied or creeping recognition.

The first strategy could be described as ‘earned engagement’. De facto states have for long tried to argue that they have earned their right to international recognition by creating stable, effective, democratic entities (Caspersen 2012). These arguments are still found, but they are increasingly employed in order to establish international links, short of recognition (Caspersen 2015). This argument may also involve an emphasis on the strategic importance of the territory. The second strategy consists of targeting non-state actors, thereby trying to circumvent international (state-level) fears of upsetting the parent state. One option is to attract foreign investment. Nagorno Karabakh’s office in Washington DC proudly proclaims “10 Reasons to Invest in NKR” (Office of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, 2017b). However, parent states opposed to engagement will also try to prevent these interactions, and both Georgia and Azerbaijan have launched intense diplomatic campaigns against international companies considering such investments (Ó Beacháin et al, 2016). Such parent state resistance would likely scare off many investors, who will already have to deal with the difficulties of operating in a context of non-recognition, for example when it comes to getting insurance (Caspersen, 2012). This illustrates the difficulty of negotiating the tension between territorial integrity and self-determination, even when targeting private companies. It is noteworthy that the tenth point on the Nagorno Karabakh investor list argues that a stronger entity would play “an important role in the development of a stronger Republic of Armenia” (Office of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, 2017b), thereby suggesting that the potential investors are part of the Armenian diaspora who may be more willing to take a risk, due to the perceived importance of such investments for the Armenian nation. Another option is to establish links with sub-state entities, such as US and Australian states. Both Nagorno Karabakh and Abkhazia have pursued ‘recognition’ from such entities. Although they do not have the power to formally recognise the de facto states, the hope is that they can convince their respective governments to consider recognition. Moreover, this form of engagement could enable other forms of exchanges, in particular trade and economic links (Ghazaryan, 2016).

Despite these strategies, it seems clear that engagement will be severely constrained for de facto states that do not occupy a strategic position, whose parent states oppose the creation of international links, and who are unwilling to fudge their claim to self-determination. The effects of this depend on whether the resulting vacuum is filled by a patron state. If it is, then the lack of alternative sources of revenue increases the de facto state’s dependence on its patron and reduces its autonomy. If it is not, then we would expect a significant resource gap. However, we even see the effects of relative international isolation in cases with high levels of patron state support. As Grono (2016) reports, “most doctors from Abkhazia or other conflict or breakaway regions in the former Soviet space do not learn about modern treatments. Most teachers have little access to new international best practices and methods. Police still work according to old manuals.” Relative isolation does not render state-building impossible, but it does affect the capacity of de facto states.

**Conclusion**

Engagement with de facto states comes in different forms and the interpretation of parent states and de facto states is often fundamentally at odds. For the former it means links between the population of the de facto state and the parent state, for the latter it means direct international interactions. This is not merely semantics, the different meanings are grounded in their respective claims to territorial integrity and self-determination. Engagement is often seen as a strategy for temporarily bracketing the issue of status, in order to allow for better relationships to be built which can eventually pave the way for a negotiated solution. However, unless the de facto state occupies a crucial strategic position, such as in the case of Somaliland, the underlying framework is one of territorial integrity. This is imposed by the parent state as well as the wider international community. The objective of such engagement is the reintegration of the contested territory, the restoration of the parent state’s territorial integrity. This may not be envisaged for the foreseeable future, but it comes with very tangible constraints that are intended to address parent state fears of creeping or implied recognition. Only certain forms of engagement are therefore permissible: interactions tend to be with individuals, rather than institutions, and hard engagement in the form of capacity-building is hardly ever on the table.

Although the analysis has emphasised the tension between territorial integrity and self-determination, and how it constrains engagement with de facto states, it has also shown that there is some room for manoeuvre. There is no clear threshold beyond which the relationship between the parent state and the de facto state, or their relative position, is altered. Red lines are negotiable in practice and are shaped by perceptions and internal politics, rather than international law. The willingness of parent and de facto states to fudge issues of sovereignty and statehood helps explain some of the variation in levels of engagement that we find between the cases. When it comes to de facto state willingness to fudge their claim to self-determination and accept the risk of creeping reintegration, the analysis pointed to two significant factors: the extent of support they receive from a patron state, and their commitment to full independence. However, even de facto states that are willing to downplay their claim to independence will face limitations: the tension between territorial integrity and self-determination will always constrain engagement policies.

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