

## To be or not to be a state? The alignment behaviours of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Russia

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### Abstract

*This article presents an adaptation of Kuik's hedging theory to analyse the secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both seeking independence from Georgia with Russian support. By examining their distinctive strategies, this study addresses the extent to which these regions seek to maintain their independence from Russia, as their patron state. The article argues for the need to modify hedging theory to accommodate the unique context of former Soviet actors and de facto states. The adaptation develops the concept of a "political hedge," with a focus on elite-driven nation-building as a mechanism to influence the likelihood of Russian integration. Abkhazia is identified as an illustrative case of hedging behaviour, whereas South Ossetia displays characteristics resembling but distinct from bandwagoning. This analysis contributes to refining the applicability of hedging theory within novel political environments and underscores the significance of elite-led nation-building in shaping state and national legitimacy in secessionist regions.*

**Keywords:** Abkhazia, balancing, bandwagoning, de facto states, Georgia, hedging, nation-building, quasi-states, Russia, South Caucasus, South Ossetia, state-building

### Introduction

This article seeks to apply and adapt Kuik's theory of hedging to the secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia by drawing in the potential alternative hedging mechanism of nation-building as a way to decrease the likelihood of integration, forced or otherwise, with Russia. In this respect, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are used as case studies with substantial similarities but important differences which result in differing incentives, processes, and aims. This article intends to answer the questions of how or to what extent Abkhazia and South Ossetia seek to maintain their independence from their patron state, Russia. To do this it will start by outlining Kuik's theory of hedging and then how this needs to be modified 1) to apply to former Soviet actors, and 2) to apply to *de facto* but largely unrecognised states. These, I argue, result in the use of an alternative hedging mechanism, this being nation-building. This application will then be conducted with respect to Abkhazia and South Ossetia finding ultimately that hedging theory, in my adaptation of it, is highly relevant to Abkhazia and not to South Ossetia. This is to the benefit of hedging theory, providing certain parameters within which it is applicable and outside of which it ceases to be. It also demonstrates a novel application of Kuik's theory to a different part of the world with different historical and cultural dynamics and to what are commonly termed *de facto* or quasi-states.

## Hedging theory<sup>1</sup>

Professor Kuik Cheng-Chwee of the National University of Malaysia has written extensively on how weaker states, mostly within ASEAN, change their alignment behaviour to hedge between great powers, in the case of ASEAN, mostly the US and China. Kuik's theory states that where neither balancing nor bandwagoning prove effective or desirable there are a number of policy options available to these states which diversify security, defence, and economic policies in order to maximise returns while minimising risks. The extent to which this is desirable or seen to be by decision-making elites and the ways in which the great powers act determines the policies which are employed. Because of the massive uncertainty inherent in the international system and elites' desire for internal legitimacy and to maintain independence from other states' influences, a weak state which has a powerful and proximate neighbour may need to seek security guarantees elsewhere as well as from that neighbour without unduly threatening the interests, security or other, of either. Similar considerations need to be made in the economic and political spheres. Often a weak state will seek substantial security guarantees from one state while placing the brunt of its economic emphasis on that state's competitor creating incentives for both larger players to increase their offerings but also to ensure that its independence is safeguarded. In this there is room for the smaller state's elites to manoeuvre, misperceive, manipulate, or be manipulated. Kuik states that it is easy to characterise such policies and broader strategies as contradictory, disorderly, and chaotic, however, this is what gives them their effect and maintains distance and independence while extracting economic, political, and security gains. In this way, hedging sits in the grey areas between balancing and bandwagoning.

## Adapting hedging theory

Applying Kuik's theory of hedging to this novel scenario requires several important adaptations to the original theory which make it more applicable, but which are also likely to bring with them their own caveats and complications. Firstly, hedging theory must be able to be applied to actors which were previously within the USSR. This contrasts in a number of ways with Kuik's main focus on ASEAN states. Here, different histories, geographies, cultures, ethnicities, religions, resources, and relationships play into a substantially different context which must be accounted for. Because of the relatively recent emergence of these former Soviet states and *de facto* states, there remain disputes, conflicts, anxieties, and overlapping interests which in other regions, including Southeast Asia, have had time to cool or have taken different forms. That is not to say that they do not exist elsewhere in the world, but rather that their effect is likely to be different and arguably less muted in many post-Soviet states. As a result, elites within all regions are liable to perceive the world in which they operate somewhat differently, partly due to geopolitical instability but also because of cultural, ethnic, religious, or historical connections and confrontations which shape how each actor approaches each situation. They are also likely to experience different pressures from public sentiments which are likely to change the ways in which they choose to respond. Another obvious difference lies in Kuik's focus on *ASEAN* states. Here, the overarching regional organisation serves a purpose not fully replicated in the South Caucasus in terms of shared interests and processes and regional cooperation. In contrast, although

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<sup>1</sup> Kuik, C. C. (2016). How do weaker states hedge? Unpacking ASEAN states' alignment behavior towards China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 25(100), 500-514.

regional bodies such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) exist and encompass many regional players, they do not bring about the same level of dialogue and reciprocity as ASEAN, as demonstrated by Georgia's departure from the CIS following their 2008 war with Russia. All this is not to say that states and *de facto* states in the former Soviet Union are exceptional or that International Relations and other political theories are not applicable, but rather that many theories have shortcomings or oversights which should be accounted for within those theories to properly reflect the political dynamics within the region.

The other adaptation which is required is to allow Kuik's hedging theory to be applied to what have essentially become *de facto* or quasi-states. These, although they remain highly contested, function in many respects as a regular state does with the most obvious exceptions that they enjoy very limited formal recognition but also that they remain massively reliant on their patron state. This means that engagement with other actors and states occurs in slightly different ways but also that their foreign policy is at least partially driven by a desire for independence in one form or another. Here, however, an important difference applies to some "*de facto* states": they do not always want to maintain their independence from all other states and instead are seeking to distance themselves from one actor or group of actors while in some cases seeking unification with another. The implications of this to their respective alignment behaviours are likely to be considerable in terms of the specific policies employed but also the broader aims and incentives driving the *de facto* states elites. Additionally, and related to the regional context, even where regional bodies exist which could further the interests of these secessionist regions, their membership is complicated by their lack of recognition. This becomes a feedback loop, undermining their ability to engage, and thus to gain the international legitimacy afforded by that. Further, and tying back to both theoretical adaptations, it is necessary to underline the caveat in Kuik's model that the elite within a state (or secessionist territory/*de facto* state in this adaptation) when considered as a whole are motivated by maintaining independence, whether that be for popularity or other reasons. This becomes one of the key defining characteristics of a state (or *de facto* state) under this adapted model. Finally, as a result of the introduction of these two adaptations to Kuik's hedging theory, I argue that there are alternative policy options available to the political elite within these secessionist regions which sit somewhat outside those stated by Kuik, but which can be categorised as a 'political hedge', albeit an internal one. This article will focus on nation-building as one such policy which alters the costs of annexation by, or coercive integration with, a neighbouring, patron, or parent state. The way in which this is conducted, however, has the potential to bring its own problems and costs relating to social cohesion, exclusive identities, and their use as a political tool.

## Background

The decline and collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 marked the end of the bipolar Cold War system which had existed since the Second World War. It also marked the start of a tumultuous period in the region's history as the multinational state fractured into many. For some, the divisions were less contentious, with Soviet-era internal borders simply becoming external ones. Others found themselves severed from the people with whom they shared the most or aggregated with groups whose interests, or perceived interests, conflicted with their own. Within these latter

categories are Abkhazia and South Ossetia which both seek their independence from Georgia.

The South Caucasus, as the wider region, has long served as a buffer between great powers. In the 1920s Georgia was drawn into the Soviet Union. Power struggles and divergent interests saw Soviet elites playing those in Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia off against each other resulting in further tensions and grievances on all fronts.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between Georgia and its separatist territories has been described as each becoming both victim and perpetrator of a ‘complex web of discriminatory structures’.<sup>3</sup> This was not helped by substantial and aggressive nationalist movements whose interests and conceptions overlapped and conflicted. Fischer states that, “[a]ccording to the Soviet census Abkhazia had about 525,000 inhabitants in 1989, of whom about 17 per-cent were Abkhaz, 47 percent Georgians, 14 percent Armenians, 13 percent Russians and 10 percent other nationalities.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, South Ossetia had a population of about 98,000 in 1989 “of which about 65,000 were ethnic Ossetians” and 29% ethnic Georgians.<sup>5</sup> This formed one of the important differences between the disputes of South Ossetia and Abkhazia with Georgia. However, as in many post-Soviet states, these tensions, ethnic and otherwise, rose to the surface with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 bringing widespread conflict and mass movements of refugees within and between regions. Both conflicts resulted in substantial casualties and varying degrees of ethnic cleansing, with exact figures being disputed and politicised. The immediate post-Cold War conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia, with North Ossetia and Russia largely supporting the separatists, led to somewhere between 40,000 and 100,000 refugees fleeing from South Ossetia and surrounding areas.<sup>6</sup> Abkhazia’s separatist movement saw around 250,000 people flee, mostly ethnic Georgians.<sup>7</sup> The conflicts in these territories saw both regions declare independence, a growth in lawlessness, and a massive loss of infrastructure and economic potential. Both were also side-lined by Russia and the broader international community in favour of other regional issues, a particularly devastating state of affairs for these regions afflicted by the recent conflicts and instability. This led to greater long-term hardship and eventually dependence on aid and security guarantees especially from Russia but also from other actors including the EU and UN.

## Application of hedging

Determining whether an actor is balancing, hedging, or bandwagoning is a matter of drawing a subjective line in the sand. Thus, although it may be helpful to characterise an actor’s actions as balancing for one purpose – such as showing where it stands relative to two great powers in absolute and simple terms – it may also be helpful to highlight the aspects of its policies which might more easily be characterised as hedging for another purpose. This article is seeking to do the latter, to highlight the policies used by the elite within these secessionist regions to position themselves favourably in relation to their patron state, and, as a result, uses the term ‘hedging’ where others

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<sup>2</sup>Fischer, S. (2016). Not frozen! The unresolved conflicts over Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in light of the crisis over Ukraine. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> ICG, *Georgia-South Ossetia: Refugee Return the Path to Peace*, Europe Briefing 38 (Tbilisi and Brussels, 19 April 2005).

<sup>7</sup>Fischer. Not frozen!

might use bandwagoning to describe the overall policy. Hedging, as Kuik defines it, can consist of elements of military, political, and economic policy used to balance risk and returns but which are in some senses opposed and counter-acting.<sup>8</sup> The balance between these, in turn, reflects the degree of power rejection or acceptance. Although both secessionist regions remain overwhelmingly aligned with Russia, as their patron state, when viewed relatively to other states, neither take the same approach in policy or objective, setting them distinctly apart.

## Abkhazia

Abkhazia, as a secessionist region of Georgia, has received massive but intermittent support from Russia. One important difference between this region and that of South Ossetia is, or rather was, its ethnic makeup. As noted previously, at the time of the last Soviet census in 1989, Abkhazia consisted of only 17% Abkhaz, a significant minority but a minority nonetheless. More recent censuses conducted in 2003 and 2011 found this to have increased to 43.8% and 50.7% respectively, although these are contested.<sup>9</sup> This had implications at the time in terms of inter-ethnic relations and power struggles, but these continue into the present day with relation to justice for recent and historical grievances and displacements. A further and hugely important differentiating factor relating to the ethnic makeup of both regions is that although the Abkhaz constituted a minority in Abkhazia before the breakup of the USSR, they largely remained within what became Georgia. South Ossetia, however, was severed from its counterpart, North Ossetia, under Soviet rule. This means that even if independence were to be achieved it would still remain cut off from its northern half. Thus, independence remains the first of a two-step reintegration policy by which South Ossetia seeks to reunite with North Ossetia under the rule of the Russian Federation while for Abkhazia it largely remains a single-step process to independence.

Politically and economically Abkhazian elites necessarily tend towards bandwagoning with Russia, albeit with certain caveats which lend themselves to hedging. Economically, Abkhazia is overwhelmingly reliant on Russia for its government budget and trade.<sup>10</sup> It has also provided Russia with exclusive rights to offshore oil and gas exploration and the operation of its railway system.<sup>11</sup> However, the relationship has not always been hospitable. Fischer writes that “Russia’s ambivalent stance during the war of secession in the 1990s left a legacy of tangible mistrust in Abkhazia’s elite and society”.<sup>12</sup> Russia also complied with trade sanctions against Abkhazia between 1994 and 1999 at the insistence of Georgia which drove massive socio-economic and infrastructural issues in Abkhazia.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Kolstø wrote that there were “mutual recriminations over Abkhazia’s reluctance to allow Russians to buy property in Abkhazia, or reclaim property they had owned there but abandoned during the 1992/93 war of secession from Georgia”, amongst other hostilities.<sup>14</sup> All this means that a general mistrust and concern exists within the Abkhazian population and

<sup>8</sup> Kuik. How do weaker states hedge?

<sup>9</sup> Dembińska, M. (2023). Legitimizing the Separatist Cause: Nation-building in the Eurasian de facto States. *Nationalities Papers*, 51(1), 80-97.

<sup>10</sup> Frear, T. (2014). The foreign policy options of a small unrecognised state: the case of Abkhazia. *Caucasus Survey*, 1(2), 1-26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Fischer. Not frozen!

<sup>13</sup> Kolstø, P., & Blakkisrud, H. (2008). Living with non-recognition: State-and nation-building in South Caucasian quasi-states. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(3), 483-509.

<sup>14</sup> Kolstø, P. (2020). Biting the hand that feeds them? Abkhazia–Russia client–patron relations. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 36(2), 140-158.

political elite over Russia's intentions and attentiveness to the territory and, although Abkhazia remains overwhelmingly reliant on Russia as its patron state, its relationship is not entirely cordial nor is it conducive to comprehensive cooperation. On the other side, Abkhazia has sought engagement from other regional actors notably the EU and UN.<sup>15</sup> It is this, alongside Abkhazia's minor distancing from Russia, which embodies their economic 'hedge'.

Much of Abkhazia's security and defence policy remains closely aligned with Russia. The logic behind this appears straightforward: without Russian support and forces Abkhazia would almost certainly have been reintegrated into Georgia and thus the *de facto* state has little to no say in the matter. Russia is Abkhazia's security guarantor and remains one of only five states around the world which recognise the breakaway region. In this role it provided military materiel and personnel to Abkhazia during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and since ensuring that any attempt to retake the region by Georgian or aligned forces retains a high degree of risk and (potentially nuclear) uncertainty. That said, the security/defence arrangements are not a one-way deal either. Although the threat to Abkhazia's existence is much more pressing, it hosts Russian military bases including a proposed naval base on its Mediterranean coast. In a BBC article published in October 2023, Aslan Bzhania, the *de facto* president of Abkhazia, is paraphrased as saying, "the new naval base [...] would boost the defence capacity of Russia and Abkhazia," that it would "safeguard the fundamental interests" of both Russia and Abkhazia, and that for Abkhazia "[s]ecurity is above all".<sup>16</sup> This demonstrates one facet of the security relationship between the two actors and indicates its asymmetry. As a result, Abkhazia can maintain only very limited independence from Russia, at least in theory. If Russia so chose it would be able to overrun the region militarily in little time. However, the fact that this has not occurred despite ample opportunity suggests alternative costs which Moscow sees in taking such an action. This is at least partially derived from a general opposition to integration with Russia from within Abkhazia as well as from other political, military, and economic considerations and priorities. In the latter categories are Russia's ability to use the current situation as leverage within the international system, the cost to Russia's reputation of annexing the territory, financial cost of annexation and occupation, amongst others. However, none of these guarantee that Russia will not annex Abkhazia and thus, if Abkhazian elites wish to maintain independence, preventative steps must be taken. These steps are observable in the *de facto* Abkhazian government's support for peacekeeping missions by the UN which can be seen as a partial security 'hedge' used to diversify away from Russia.

## South Ossetia

In many respects South Ossetia finds itself in a similar situation to Abkhazia. Both are seeking to secede from Georgia with Russia's patronage, both have had protracted conflicts with their parent state since the fall of the Soviet Union, both consist of various ethnicities, cultures, religions, and languages, and both have found limited engagement, recognition, and support from the international community. However, as

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<sup>15</sup> Nygren, B. (2011). Russia and Georgia—From Confrontation to War: What is Next? In *Russian foreign policy in the 21st century* (pp. 101-120). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

<sup>16</sup> Chatterjee, P. (2023, Oct. 5) *Abkhazia: Russia to build naval base in Georgian separatist region, says local leader*. BBC News

noted, South Ossetian elites have external and ethnically defined objectives and thus differ in terms of their ultimate aims.

In the economic realm, South Ossetia has sought to integrate its economy with Russia, employing the Russian ruble as its official currency, relying on Russian investment, and benefiting from preferential trade and economic agreements with Moscow.<sup>17</sup> These economic ties not only support South Ossetia's quest for independence from Georgia but also tether the region more closely to its patron state. In contrast, Abkhazia has adopted a more cautious stance, avoiding complete economic and monetary integration with Russia, in line with its aim to achieve independence. Moreover, South Ossetia's political landscape is heavily aligned with Russia. Russian officials have a significant presence in the region, and South Ossetia operates under a government that enjoys Moscow's backing, with many of the region's political elite having overlapping interests and backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> This political alignment enhances the region's independence, in some ways, but it also entails a considerable degree of political dependence on Russia. This contrasts with Abkhazia with its relatively independent political structure allowing it to chart a more autonomous course toward sovereignty. In terms of military policies, South Ossetia's close military ties with Russia are more apparent but comparable to those of Abkhazia. It hosts Russian military bases and personnel and depends on security guarantees from Moscow.<sup>19</sup> While these arrangements enhance South Ossetia's security and defence capabilities, they also deepen its military reliance on Russia. Abkhazia, alternatively, maintains its own military forces. This demonstrates the latter's commitment to maintaining a certain level of self-reliance in defence, reflecting its pursuit of independence. South Ossetia, therefore, appears to engage in a strategy of bandwagoning with Russia, aligning itself closely with the patron state to maximise support and resources while giving up a degree of independence in the process. The use of the term 'bandwagoning', however, fails to reflect the reality of the situation. Most importantly, the fact that South Ossetia wishes to gain independence with the aim of abandoning this *de facto* statehood points to a disparity in its aims relative to those of other, even *de facto*, states. Thus, it can reasonably be argued that South Ossetia does not fit the model or definition of a state or *de facto* state and should be termed otherwise.

### **Legitimacy and nation-building in Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

The economic, political, and military relationships between Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Russia simultaneously lend legitimacy to the *de facto* governments and undermine them. In Abkhazia, this contradiction is borne out of the practical fact that the *de facto* Abkhazian state exists with the consent of Russia but also that the Abkhazian 'nation' – if such a term can be used – questions that reliance and responds harshly when too much ground is conceded.<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, the population remaining within South Ossetia react positively to the *de facto* government's Russian alignment, with upwards of 99% of the population voting in a 1992 referendum to integrate with Russia, although this referendum is contested.<sup>21</sup> Legitimacy, in this sense, is two-directional and connected with both state- and nation-building. The largely

<sup>17</sup>Hoch, T., Souleimanov, E., & Baranec, T. (2014). Russia's role in the official peace process in South Ossetia. *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series*, (23), 53-71.

<sup>18</sup>Fischer. Not frozen!

<sup>19</sup>Nygren. Russia and Georgia—From Confrontation to War: What is Next?

<sup>20</sup> Eurasianet (2023, May 31) *Abkhazia faces protests as discontent mounts*

<sup>21</sup> Hoch, T. (2020). Independence or Unification with a Patron State? Not Such Dichotomous Ideas as One Would Think: Evidence from South Ossetia. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 12(1), 68-89.

institutional process of state-building can substantially be tied to Russian assistance and, if this were the only relevant factor, the legitimacy of the *de facto* Abkhazian state would be wholly reliant on Russia's decisions. However, accounting for the relationship between the nation and (*de facto*) state-level legitimacy is also needed. Here, the legitimacy of the government is not merely performance based but also influenced by national identity and how positively the public perceive this as changing.<sup>22</sup> It is in this area that the two-directional influence is observed. The nation can be seen as being constructed in two ways simultaneously. Firstly, organically from the bottom up, as individuals and communities interact with and perceive each other and their collective or respective histories. But secondly, through a more artificial, elite-led process by which these interactions and perceptions are determined through policy decisions. This article takes the view that these models of nation-'building' are not incompatible but focusses in on the latter. This is justified on two grounds: that this conforms with Kuik's theory on hedging behaviour as being elite-led, albeit with consideration for public opinion; and that this is realistic, if somewhat simplistic, reflecting the substantial (potential) impact of political elites in influencing popular sentiments and perceptions.

In Abkhazia, nation-building takes many forms and is significantly exclusive, favouring the Abkhaz ethnicity and language. For example, Rouvinski writes that "it is widely acknowledged [in the history textbooks used in Abkhazia], the Abkhaz language is one of the oldest languages in the world".<sup>23</sup> Moreover, textbooks produced in Georgia are not able to be used in Abkhazia.<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, in South Ossetia the *de facto* government has largely ignored the issue given its focus on eventual reunion with North Ossetia under the Russian Federation. Dembińska states outright that "[I]ittle nation-building effort is invested, while South Ossetia waits to be absorbed by its northern neighbor."<sup>25</sup> As a result, a correlation can be drawn between the nation-building policies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as forms of alignment behaviour, and their respective aims. This, again, raises the question of to what extent these secessionist regions can be considered *de facto* states or whether another term would prove more useful and accurate.

## Conclusion

This article has applied Kuik's hedging theory to the secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, emphasising the distinctiveness in their strategies to maintain independence from Georgia with Russia's support. Abkhazia's approach exhibits characteristics of hedging as it attempts to balance relations with Russia and engage with other international actors, albeit on a limited basis. In contrast, South Ossetia's alignment with Russia showcases a more bandwagoning-like orientation, although this term is questioned given its presupposition of statehood. This analysis underscores the necessity of adapting hedging theory to account for the specific dynamics present in post-Soviet actors and supposedly *de facto* states. The adaptation used develops the concept of a "political hedge," with a focus on elite-led nation-building, which plays a vital role in shaping the legitimacy of both state and nation within these regions but also alters the costs of attempted annexation by Russia.

<sup>22</sup> Dembińska. Legitimizing the Separatist Cause

<sup>23</sup> Rouvinski, V. (2007). Ethnic enclosure in Soviet and post-Soviet school textbooks. *IPSHU English Research Report Series*, 20, 53-63.

<sup>24</sup> Dembińska. Legitimizing the Separatist Cause

<sup>25</sup> Dembińska. Legitimizing the Separatist Cause



Moreover, it highlights the divergence in nation-building strategies, with Abkhazia emphasising exclusivity and cultural preservation, while South Ossetia, aiming for reunification with North Ossetia, places less emphasis on these efforts, thus offering a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic geopolitical landscape in these secessionist regions.

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