
Post-Soviet de facto states: lessons learned and everyday realities

MIREES' Open Lecture

Professor G. Comai, who currently works as Doctoral Researcher at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, delivered on December 15th 2015 an open lecture on de-facto states. The states mainly discussed, however, were those of the post-Soviet space: i.e. Transnistria (Moldova), South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan). The lecture also extensively focused on theoretical debates and definitions; however, it immediately provided an interesting way to capture the complexity of studying, in broader terms, the shift of a state's border. Indeed, just typing on Google maps Crimea, according to the provider [.com/ua/.ru](https://www.google.com/maps/@45.1888543,33.9852944,15z) the user would find three different representations of its borders: dotted in the first one, not present in the second one, marked in the third case.

The lecturer discussed N. Caspersen's (2012) definition of the features of unrecognized states: 1) the entity has achieved de facto independence, 2) its leadership is seeking to build further state institutions and demonstrate its own legitimacy, 3) the entity has sought but not achieved international recognition, 4) it has existed for at least two years. However, Comai openly declared to prefer the label of de-facto states rather than unrecognized ones. According to Comai's own definition, de-facto states have: 1) achieved and maintained for an extended period internal sovereignty over an area, with 2) a degree of internal legitimacy, but 3) only limited formal recognition at the international level, or none at all.

Another key point lays in the fact that de-facto states struggle to be accepted in the "family" of international relations. Because of this, the self-declared Islamic State, for example, cannot be considered a de facto state but rather an "ultimate revisionist player" whose aim is challenging the world order. Furthermore, a trick-situation could arise if a territory, under a common government, though unrecognized by the international community, does not want to achieve independence. In this case, should they be considered puppet states? An example could be South Ossetia which is carrying out the procedures to hold a referendum and join the Russian Federation. Another

interesting category outlined by professor Comai is that of states which understood the comparable advantages achievable in being partially independent territories (Hong Kong and Porto Rico being the most notorious example).

Focusing on the post-Soviet de-facto states, Comai's lecture helped us also to understand key trends in the development of Russia's foreign policy: i.e. the meaning and reasons of its control and political leverage over the so called "near-abroad" or "common-neighborhood" with the European Union. In my opinion, the very existence of this "statelets" and the possible emergence of Luhansk and Donetsk Republics as stable/military governments, represent a threat to the European Union, its values as well as its policies towards the region: namely the ENP (2003) and the Eastern Partnership (2009). Comai's theoretical and in depth-description (based on his direct experiences in these territories) of de-facto states enabled us to reflect on the role that the EU is expected to play. In the end, we learned that the study of de-facto states and the "frozen conflicts" connected to them is critical in order to resolve major problems in the realm of international relations: from extremism to migration as well as regional blackmailing.

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