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The Life after Life of the 2006 Transnistrian Sovereignty Referendum

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Abstract

In 2006, the authorities of the de facto state of Transnistria unilaterally held a sovereignty referendum. Almost all voters supported Transnistria gaining internationally recognized independence and subsequently integrating/associating with Russia. Despite such clear results, the poll was not recognized internationally and, consequently, not implemented. However, this was not a problem for the Transnistrian leadership, since the primary objective of the referendum was not to reallocate sovereignty, but to domestically empower Transnistria's President Igor Smirnov. Based on the discourse of Transnistria's next president, Yevgeniy Shevchuk, this article argues that the referendum was not placed in the dustbin of history. Analysis of the official Transnistrian news published during his presidency from 2011–2016 shows that Shevchuk re-exploited the 2006 sovereignty referendum. His aim was not to reallocate sovereignty either, but to reach the following goals: 1. procure legitimacy of the Transnistrian sovereignty cause internationally; 2. empower Transnistria vis-à-vis its parent state, Moldova; 3. boost relations with Transnistria's patron, Russia; and 4. empower himself domestically. Arguably, the argument about the strategic use of past unilateral sovereignty referendums also works in cases of other de facto states, which can be analyzed using the analytical framework presented in this article.

Keywords: Transnistria; de facto state; unilateral sovereignty referendum; patron; Russia

Introduction

Transnistria is a de facto state that is an entity that has achieved and maintained internal sovereignty over its area for an extended period, with a degree of internal legitimacy but no formal recognition at the international level (Ó Beacháin, Comai, and Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili 2016, 442; for more on de facto states, see Pegg 1998; Geldenhuys 2009; Caspersen 2012). This means that Transnistria is an illegal entity under international law, and its territory formally belongs to its universally recognized parent state, that is, Moldova. In other words, Transnistria is a sovereign anomaly, resulting in sovereignty issues playing a key role in Transnistria's internal and external politics. Among others, this has been demonstrated by the Transnistrian authorities organizing five referendums on the reallocation of sovereignty during more than 30 years of Transnistria's independence (Volkova 2006). Importantly, these polls were organized unilaterally, that is, with neither a valid legal basis nor the consent of the Moldovan parent state.

The last such unilateral sovereignty referendum in Transnistria took place in September 2006. It asked voters two questions: did they support the course for the (internationally recognized) independence of Transnistria and subsequent free integration/association (*prisoyedineniye*) of Transnistria with Russia (that is, Transnistria's patron); and did they consider it possible to renounce Transnistria's (de facto) independence and subsequently Transnistria becoming part of

Moldova (that is, Transnistria's parent state)? According to official data, almost all voters answered "yes" to the first question and "no" to the second question (Volkova 2006, 209). This unanimous vote was most likely the result of rigging activities of the Transnistrian authorities (Zabarah 2011, 173–175; Mendez and Germann 2018, 159; Kosienkowski 2022, 506). However, as shown in the June 2010 survey poll presented by O'Loughlin, Toal, and Chamberlain-Creangă (2013, 252–253), the results generally reflected the preferences of people about the status of Transnistria.

Despite its clear results, the poll was not recognized internationally due to its unilateral character. Consequently, it was not implemented, which meant that no de jure reallocation of sovereignty occurred. However, this was not a problem for the de facto initiator of the referendum, Transnistria's President Igor Smirnov. He must have expected non-implementation of the unilaterally organized poll and sought another goal. As Kosienkowski (2022, 509–511) argued, instead of de jure reallocation of sovereignty, Smirnov's primary objective behind the referendum was to domestically empower himself to gain electoral advantage in the imminent December 2006 presidential elections. To put it simply, he expected that people's support for independence expressed in the poll, over which he secured full ownership, would translate into support for him during the presidential balloting. The point is that he expected to be seen as the only actor that could satisfy people's sovereignty aspirations.

Kosienkowski (2022, 505–509) also mentioned three possible secondary motivations of Smirnov behind the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum. They were as follows: 1. procuring the international legitimacy of the Transnistrian sovereignty cause in the context of the advancement of Montenegro and Kosovo independence aspirations, 2. empowering Transnistria against Moldova, because Moldova undermined Transnistria's de facto independence shortly before, in March 2006, by taking the Transnistrian export under its control, 3. boosting relations with Russia to be more resilient against Moldova's assertive policy toward Transnistria.

As noted by Kosienkowski (2022, 511), the referendum met its main objective, as it contributed to Smirnov's reelection as president. Arguably, it also met, at least to some extent, its secondary goals (cf. Kosienkowski 2022, 505–509). Based on the case of Smirnov's successor, President Yevgeniy Shevchuk, this article argues that the referendum was not placed in the dustbin of history when it played its role. The analysis of the news published during his presidency between December 2011 and December 2016 by Transnistria's official news agency, *Ol'viya-press* and then *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya*, shows that Shevchuk recalled and re-exploited the 2006 sovereignty referendum. As in the case of Smirnov, the aim of Shevchuk was not to reallocate sovereignty, since it was unattainable, but to reach other goals. They were as follows: 1. procuring legitimacy of the Transnistrian sovereignty cause internationally; 2. empowering Transnistria vis-à-vis its parent state, Moldova; 3. boosting relations with the patron of Transnistria, Russia; and 4. empowering himself domestically. Thus, the 2006 sovereignty poll was revived in Transnistria.

This article contributes to studies on Transnistria by analyzing the strategic use of its 2006 sovereignty referendum by President Shevchuk between 2011 and 2016. More specifically, it complements the article by Kosienkowski (2022), who has focused on the motives of Shevchuk's predecessor, President Smirnov, for initiating this poll back in 2006. More generally, it adds to research on Transnistria's internal and external political dynamics, which is still progressing (see, for example, Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2011; Isachenko 2012; Kosienkowski 2012; Balmaceda 2013; Devyatkov and Kosienkowski 2013; Ó Beacháin, Comai, and Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili 2016; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2017; Dembińska and Mérand 2019; Pacher 2020; Berg and Vits 2022; Colbey 2022).

This study also contributes to the literature on unilateral sovereignty referendums with a framework of motivations for recalling historical polls of such kind in de facto states, and with an analysis of a specific case of strategic use of such polls. The point is that this literature focuses mostly on why, how, and when unilateral sovereignty referendums are organized, and with what impact (see, for example, Scheindlin 2012; Qvortrup 2014a, 2014b; Şen 2015; Germann 2017, 2022; Kosienkowski 2022; Harguindéguy et al. 2023). Consequently, it includes few considerations about strategic use of past referendums, which are limited to general claims about recalling such polls to

produce legitimacy for the sovereignty cause internationally, or to empower sovereignty claimants vis-à-vis their external opponents (see, for example, Scheindlin 2012, 72; Germann 2017, 54).

The article starts with presenting the concept of a unilateral sovereignty referendum and a framework of motivations behind their organization and their later recall by authorities of de facto states. Next, it focuses on the strategic use of the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum by President Shevchuk between 2011 and 2016. Consequently, it presents his position on the poll, explains the methodology of the study, and examines a set of Shevchuk's goals behind recalling this poll, using news from Transnistria's official news agency. Finally, the article goes beyond the case of Shevchuk exploiting a sovereignty referendum during his presidency, and discusses the argument about strategic use of past unilateral sovereignty polls in other cases. These include the cases of other political actors in Transnistria, in other de facto states, and, additionally, in sub-state entities. In addition, the article proposes new research avenues.

Unilateral Sovereignty Referendums and Their Strategic Use in De Facto States

Mendez and Germann (2018, 145) define a sovereignty referendum as "a direct popular vote on a reallocation of sovereignty between at least two territorial centers," where they understand sovereignty as "the right to make authoritative political decisions within a territorial unit." When it comes to the typology of sovereignty polls, Mendez and Germann (2018, 144) mention official (consensual) and unofficial (unilateral/illegal) referendums depending on whether they have a valid legal basis or a formal acceptance of all involved sovereignty claimants. They also identify another 12 types of sovereignty referendums, combining 2 criteria of the scope of the sovereignty shift (partial, full, and pooled) and the logic of the sovereignty reallocation (integrative and disintegrative). These 12 types, coupled in 6 pairs, are as follows: incorporation and sub-state merger, autonomy and sub-state secession, unification and transfer, independence and irredentist separation, supranational accession and supranational delegation, and supranational withdrawal and supranational repatriation (Mendez and Germann 2018, 146–148; for more about these types, see Aubert, Germann, and Mendez 2015, 11–13).

In the case of de facto states, sovereignty referendums are mostly taken unilaterally. They seek full sovereignty shift and have a disintegrative logic, which means that they are about either independence or irredentist separation. Although such polls are won with a very healthy margin, they are not recognized internationally and, consequently, their results are not implemented (Germann 2017, 92–94). It means that, when initiated, their initiators are driven by other motives than de jure reallocation of sovereignty, since as rational actors, they must know that such reallocation will not occur. In the context of de facto states, as Kosienkowski (2022, 499–502) pointed out, a set of possible motivations is as follows: 1. procuring legitimacy of the sovereignty cause internationally, 2. empowering a de facto state vis-à-vis its parent state, 3. ensuring unity for the sovereignty cause internally, 4. meeting a patron's demands, 5. boosting relations with a patron, 6. facilitating de facto integration with a patron, and 7. empowering an initiator of a referendum domestically (see also Walker 2003; Wheatley 2012, 65–72; Qvortrup 2014a; Şen 2015, 42–44; Germann 2017, 51–54; Kelle and Sienknecht 2020; Sanjaume-Calvet 2021). It should be added that referendums are supposed to bring expected benefits in a relatively short period of time.

Crucially, unilateral sovereignty referendums may not be placed in the dustbin of history when they have served their role. This is because the results of such polls have not been implemented, which means that these polls are suspended between life and death. Consequently, they can be resurrected by political actors in de facto states for their strategic purposes. Here, the advantage for these political actors is that they do not need allocate an amount of material resources and political efforts to organize sovereignty polls. They have already taken place, and they are readily available to be recalled and re-exploited. Moreover, political actors have decisively victorious referendums at their disposal. To be sure, because of the time that has passed since the referendums, their results may be contested. However, this problem can be addressed, for example, by providing results of

recent survey polls, which confirm that the outcome of past referendum is still valid. The same can be done to tackle a deficit of international legitimacy, which historical polls suffer from due to their unilateral character and suspiciously unanimous results. Finally, political actors can reinterpret past referendums, including the wording of the questions, along with their needs.

In principle, the motives for recalling past unilateral sovereignty referendums in de facto states coincide with the motives mentioned above for organizing them. Accordingly, such polls may be mentioned to procure legitimacy of the sovereignty cause internationally. Here, the demonstration of people's support for the cause expressed in a referendum is expected to generate a degree of international sympathy, followed by some concessions and support for de facto states. Next, by recalling past sovereignty referendums, political actors may want to empower de facto states vis-à-vis their parent states. In this case, polls are used as a weapon to extract some concessions to de facto states from parent states and minimize de facto states' concessions to parent states, including by designating the will of the people as a "red line." By referring to historical referendums, political actors may also try to discipline groups, which have taken too conciliatory stance toward parent states. The goal would be to ensure unity for the sovereignty cause internally, along with the will of the people expressed in previous polls (cf. Kosienkowski 2022, 500).

Other three motives for recalling past unilateral sovereignty referendums in de facto states are related to their patron, which is a state that plays a pivotal role in supporting them (Ó Beacháin, Comai, and Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili 2016, 442). These motives are as follows: meeting a patron's demands, boosting relations with a patron, and facilitating de facto integration with a patron. Accordingly, political actors from de facto states may refer to sovereignty referendums from the past to satisfy demands of their patron, which wants to use a separatism threat against its adversaries, including against parent states of de facto states. In the case of referendums on integration or closer cooperation with a patron, a motivation for recall may be to impress the patron's government and society and, consequently, to attract more patronal support. Then, recalling irredentist polls may be used as a legitimation tool to facilitate de facto integration of de facto states with their patron. In general terms, this reminds us of the goal of sovereignty referendums, which (immediately after they took place) paved the way for Russia's de facto annexation of Ukrainian Crimea in 2014, and eastern and southern regions of Ukraine in 2022 (cf. Kosienkowski 2022, 501).

Finally, political actors in de facto states may recall past unilateral sovereignty referendums to empower themselves domestically. Indeed, since sovereignty issues play a key role in the domestic politics of de facto states, which are sovereign anomalies, references to such polls can impress local people. To be more precise, political actors recall such polls to demonstrate that they respect the will of the people, which was expressed through polls, and make efforts to implement it. Consequently, they expect past referendums to help them establish themselves, or enhance their image, as the only actors that could satisfy people's sovereignty aspirations. By recalling such polls, they can seek to keep, gain, or regain popular support, and they can try to achieve these goals not only directly but also indirectly – for example, by accusing political adversaries of ignoring the popular will expressed in sovereignty referendums. It can be added that political actors may need the support of people to consolidate their power, overcome their legitimacy crisis, or improve their chances of winning forthcoming elections (cf. Kosienkowski 2022, 501–502).

All these motivations mentioned in this conceptual part of the article are used in the following empirical part to examine the case of Transnistria's President Shevchuk, who recalled and re-exploited the 2006 unilateral sovereignty referendum during his presidency between 2011 and 2016.

Origins and Characteristics of Transnistria

It is worth highlighting the origins and characteristics of Transnistria before focusing on the strategic use of the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum by Transnistria's president,

Shevchuk. Transnistria declared its independence from Soviet Moldova on September 2, 1990 (while remaining a part of the Soviet Union until the end of its existence in December 1991). It fully achieved its de facto independence two years later, in July 1992, when it won a brief war with already independent Moldova, thanks to support provided by the Russian Fourteenth Army that stationed in the Transnistrian region.

Troebst (2002/2003, 19–22) presents the various reasons for the separation of Transnistria from Moldova, which have been identified in the scholarly literature. These were one or more of the following differences between the conflicting parties (the characteristic of Transnistria is given in brackets as the first and the characteristic of Moldova as the second): economic and social (industrial with socially active workers vs. rural), ethnic (Russians and Ukrainians vs. Moldovans/Romanians), linguistic (preference for Russian vs. preference for Moldovan/Romanian), cultural (Slavic and Russified population vs. Latin and Romanianized population), ideological (Soviet internationalism vs. Moldovan/Romanian nationalism), political (desire to keep power in the Transnistrian region vs. desire to gain and enhance power in the whole republic/country), geopolitical (remaining part of the Soviet Union vs. having independent country or merging with Romania), and historical (ties with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and memory of the Transnistrian autonomy within Soviet Ukraine in 1924–1940 vs. ties with Romania, including in 1918–1940 and 1941–1944, when Moldova was an integral part of Romania). In addition to these dissimilarities, Troebst (2002/2003, 20) also mentions another possible reason for Transnistria's separation from Moldova – namely, great power politics, that is, the desire of the Soviet Union and then Russia to keep Moldova in its influence sphere. To put it simply, all these differences and Russia's great power politics existed during Shevchuk's presidency, sustaining the conflict between Transnistria and Moldova.

Regarding the characteristic of Transnistria, it is borrowed from Ó Beacháin, Comai, and Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili (2016), who presented internal and external dynamics of the Transnistrian de facto state in a paper published in the last year of Shevchuk's presidency. Transnistria was a narrow strip of land sandwiched between Moldova and Ukraine, populated by a half million people, including Moldovans (32 percent), Russians (30 percent), and Ukrainians (29 percent). In this context, it should be mentioned that the Transnistrian authorities undertook nation-building efforts to promote cohesion of this multiethnic population of Transnistria and to preserve the above-mentioned differences with the population of Moldova. To be more precise, the Transnistrian authorities harnessed local Transnistrian, Soviet, Russian, and (partially) Moldovan elements to form a new Transnistrian nation. Among others, they heavily promoted the Russian language, despite the official trilinguality (Russian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan written in Cyrillic), which had the dominant position (see Comai and Venturi 2015; Osipov and Vasilevich 2019; Ganohariti 2020; Marandici 2020; Dembińska 2023). To continue, Transnistria had an authoritarian presidential-like political system, a highly industrialized and export-orientated economy, an expanded state apparatus and numerous pensioners, and a relatively strong army.

Transnistria maintained the strongest external relations with Russia, resulting from linguistic and cultural affinity, political preferences, historical memory, and the reception of vital Russian patronal support. Serving as a patron of Transnistria, Russia provided the Transnistrian de facto state with security guarantees, natural gas (for free) that was crucial for the Transnistrian industry, financial and in-kind assistance, extra money for pensioners, protective political umbrella in the international arena, and so on. Until Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, Transnistria also had good relations with neighboring Ukraine, which served as Transnistria's window to the outside world, including for Transnistrian export. In addition, the Transnistrian de facto state kept good relationship with like-minded Eurasian de facto states (Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan). Finally, Transnistria engaged in relations with its parent state, Moldova, and the West, which included both conflictual and cooperative elements.

Shevchuk and the 2006 Transnistrian Sovereignty Referendum

Interestingly, it was Shevchuk who, while a speaker of the Transnistrian parliament, originally proposed in March 2006 the idea of organizing a referendum on Transnistria's independence. His aim was to gain electoral advantage in the imminent presidential elections. However, for the same reason, the idea of a sovereignty referendum was successfully "kidnapped" by the then President Smirnov. Furthermore, he decided to also ask about Transnistria's relationship with Russia, which Shevchuk initially opposed (Kosienkowski 2022, 502–504). To recall, the final wording of the referendum was the following: 1. Do you support the course for the independence of Transnistria and subsequent free integration/association (*prisoyedineniye*) of Transnistria with Russia? 2. Do you consider it possible to renounce Transnistria's independence and subsequently Transnistria becoming part of Moldova? According to the official data, 97.2 percent of the voters answered "yes" to the first question, and 94.9 percent of the voters said "no" to the second question, while turnout was 78.6 percent (Volkova 2006, 209).

When it comes to the interpretation of these questions by Smirnov during a referendum campaign, it was quite understandable that the first one was about gaining internationally recognized independence and the second one was about renouncing de facto independence. However, President Smirnov was not clear what kind of Transnistria's relationship with Russia, additionally asked in the first question, he had in mind. During his speeches, he initially talked about Transnistria's integration with Russia (that, is Transnistria becoming part of Russia, preceded by gaining internationally recognized independence, which was required by Russian law), and then mainly about Transnistria's association with Russia (in such a case, Transnistria's independence was to be kept) (Kosienkowski 2022, 502–504). It can be added that such an ambivalent interpretation of the Russia-related question was probably deliberate to attract votes of supporters of both options (Kosienkowski 2022, 510–511). When it comes to the parliamentary Speaker Shevchuk, he finally accepted only the idea of the association of Transnistria with Russia (*Novyy Region 2* 2006).

Importantly, during his presidency in 2011–2016, Shevchuk generally stayed with Smirnov's interpretation of referendum questions, although with some deviation. He appeared to understand "independence" in the same way as Smirnov did. Likewise, it was unclear how he understood Transnistria's relationship with Russia. He sometimes talked, just as Smirnov did, about integration of (internationally recognized) Transnistria with Russia (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2014i). At other times, instead of mentioning Smirnov's other idea of Transnistria associating with Russia, he talked about Transnistria cooperating closely with Russia or joining Russia-led Eurasian integration structures (while maintaining its de jure or de facto independence). He mentioned structures such as the Eurasian Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union (for example, *Ol'viya-press* 2012h). It also happened that Shevchuk combined these and other (but unnamed) options, saying that Transnistrians wanted Transnistria to unite (*ob"yedinit'sya*) with Russia in any form (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2016f; see also Comai 2018). For the sake of simplicity, all these interpretations are grouped together in this article under the umbrella phrase "the establishment of some form of close relationship between Transnistria and Russia." A precise form of this relationship named by Shevchuk is mentioned when necessary.

Although the 2006 referendum on sovereignty had clear results in favor of Transnistria's independence and the subsequent establishment of some form of close relationship with Russia, Shevchuk must have been aware that these results could be undermined due to the amount of time that passed since taking the poll. Therefore, while referring to the referendum during his presidential term, he often underlined that its outcome was up to date, additionally referring to local survey polls (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2016d). He also used these survey polls to address the original deficit of international legitimacy of the referendum, which resulted from its unilateral character, unclear and biased questions, unfair campaign, and suspiciously unanimous results (see Kosienkowski 2022, 505–506).

President Shevchuk's Motivations for Recalling the Referendum

Methodology

The motivations of President Shevchuk to recall the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum are identified in this article from the news produced by Transnistria's official news agency during his presidency between December 30, 2011, and December 16, 2016. This news agency was called *Ol'viya-press* until September 2012, when it was renamed *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya*. Since it can be considered as the main mouthpiece of Shevchuk, it is regarded here as the most comprehensive source of information on his strategic use of the 2006 poll. At the same time, it should be mentioned that reliance on the official news agency of Transnistria had its limits. To be more precise, the agency could not have informed about all events (this is what happened, for example, with the author's interview with Shevchuk taken at the beginning of his presidency in March 2012; see Schreiber and Kosienkowski 2012), and did not show unofficial talks of Transnistria with international actors, Moldova, and Russia. Then, it usually did not provide full speeches of Shevchuk, just their summaries or excerpts from them, which means that his words on the referendum could have been distorted or not mentioned at all. However, despite these limitations, news releases were still considered a solid base to identify Shevchuk's motivations to recall the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum.

Ol'viya-press and *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* published their news online at www.olvia.idknet.com and www.novostipmr.com, respectively. However, the news releases produced by *Ol'viya-press* were no longer available on the Internet at the time of writing this article. In their turn, these produced by *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* were available on its website; however, relevant ones could not be easily found because the search engine for the website did not work. Therefore, two text files with the entire content of *Ol'viya-press* and *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* websites were used for analytical purposes. The content of *Ol'viya-press* was scrapped in February 2016 and that of *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* in March 2017 and was provided to the author by Giorgio Comai, a researcher who promotes the use of new technologies in qualitative research of de facto states (see Comai 2017).

Before selecting data on Shevchuk's strategic use of the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum from these two text files, two assumptions were made. First, it was assumed that the strategic use of a given sovereignty referendum requires political actors to make clear references to it. Otherwise, political actors may not be properly understood by their audiences, meaning that their referendum argument is useless. Second, it was assumed that they can make not only explicit references (by using the word "referendum" or its synonym, saying that it took place in their de facto state, and providing the date of its occurrence unless they refer to the latest referendum), but also implicit references to a given sovereignty referendum when they talk about all sovereignty referendums taken in their de facto state (by using the word "referendums" or its synonym, and saying that they took place in their de facto state).

Accordingly, the two text files with the content of Transnistria's official news agency in the Russian language were searched for news with the Russian keyword *referendum* (referendum) and its main synonym *plebistsit* (plebiscite). Importantly, given that both the words *referendum* and *plebistsit* are also root words, all cases of their use, that is, in all case forms (the Russian language has six cases) in singular and plural forms, could be identified. Subsequently, the data found were screened for news with explicit and implicit references to the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum made by President Shevchuk and, additionally, Transnistria's government officials. As it turned out, these were mainly senior officials from Transnistria's Foreign Ministry. The point behind looking for references by government officials was that the government was, in fact, subordinated to the president, and it is assumed here that it presented his position (cf. Serzhanova 2016, 178–179). For simplicity, all references are presented in this article as if they were made by Shevchuk himself (or, more precisely, by the "collective Shevchuk" or the Shevchuk

regime). As a result, 125 news items were selected in total. For the sake of space economy, only about one-third of them, that is, those most important or exemplary, are quoted in this study.

Then, this 125 news was content-analyzed to determine Shevchuk's motivations to recall the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum. More precisely, interpretive content analysis was (initially) used. As explained by Ahuvia (2001), it is used when a researcher looks for latent content and subtler meanings. Undoubtedly, motivations fall under these labels because they are rarely publicly manifested by political actors. Crucially, while coding the data in the interpretive content analysis, the predetermined coding rules are avoided. Instead, each text is approached individually by the researcher to make the most compelling and contextually sensitive subjective interpretations of the focal text and code it accordingly. Here, the researcher relies on their high levels of expertise, which the author believes has when it comes to Transnistria, acquiring it during nearly two decades of research on this de facto state.

Consequently, Shevchuk's motivations for recalling the 2006 sovereignty referendum were interpretively derived from the news releases and coded to the seven categories of the motivation framework presented in the conceptual section of the article. It was determined that Shevchuk was driven by four motivations. They were as follows: 1. procuring legitimacy of the Transnistrian sovereignty cause internationally; 2. empowering Transnistria vis-à-vis its parent state, Moldova; 3. boosting relations with the patron of Transnistria, Russia; and 4. empowering himself domestically. The remaining three motivations from the framework were found to be either non-existent or unlikely. These were the following: 1. ensuring unity for the sovereignty cause internally; 2. meeting a patron's demands; and 3. facilitating de facto integration with a patron. Consequently, they were excluded from further considerations in this methodological part of the article.

Although interpretive content analysis was useful in identifying a set of Shevchuk's four motivations to recall the 2006 sovereignty referendum, which is used in further considerations, its coding turned out in practice to be overly subjective. Among others, this resulted in the majority of references to the referendum made by Shevchuk being subjectively interpreted as driven by two, three, or four motivations. Crucially, this was expected to obscure a further qualitative assessment of Shevchuk's motives to recall the referendum. The point is that the abundance of occurrences of motivations could cause this analysis to be about everything and, consequently, nothing. Therefore, to overcome these problems, traditional content analysis was (ultimately) used to analyze the content of the 125 news releases with Shevchuk's references to the 2006 referendum. Although, as noted by Ahuvia (2001), it is applied when searching for manifest content, which does not include motivations, it uses predetermined coding rules, which facilitates finding what is looked for, including motivations, and eases and makes coding more objective.

Accordingly, the coding rule was devised saying that each news included just one motivation and that its specific type depended on whom Shevchuk was talking to. The single-motive approach was inspired by Morel (2007, 1064), one of the main students of the motives for holding referendums, who claims that although various motives can be at play, the single primary motivation needs to be identified and analyzed (consequently, secondary motives are ignored). Importantly, the application of this single-motive approach in this article was expected to ease and clarify the further qualitative assessment of Shevchuk's motivations for recalling the 2006 sovereignty referendum. In its turn, the audience-oriented approach was inspired by the political communication literature, which notes that the communication goals may be tailored to the targeted audience (see, for example, Denton 1980; Bergstrand and Whitham 2022). This tailored goal is designated here as the primary one. In summary, using traditional content analysis and adopting single-motive and audience-oriented approaches to coding were pragmatic and deductive choices.

Shevchuk spoke to four audiences, that is, international, Moldovan, Russian, and Transnistrian, which were represented by officials, journalists, scholars, activists, and so on. The audience was usually suggested by Shevchuk's physical (for example, having a personal meeting) or distant (for example, making an appeal) interaction with it covered by the news item, and sometimes it was suggested by the interaction mentioned in a text passage with reference to a referendum. For

example, giving a speech to the Russian news agency, Shevchuk directly addressed "European colleagues" referring to the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum (*Novosti Pridnestrov'ya 2014h*), and this was considered here as targeting an international (Western) audience but not a Russian audience, as suggested by the interaction covered by the news item. To continue, these four audiences corresponded to Shevchuk's four motivations, inherited from interpretive content analysis, related to, respectively, international actors, Moldova, Russia, and Transnistria. Therefore, for example, it was considered that when talking to the Moldovan audience, Shevchuk referred to the referendum to empower Transnistria against Moldova, and such a motivation was coded accordingly.

Table 1 presents a quantitative assessment of Shevchuk's four motivations to recall the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum. Then, the four subsequent subsections include a qualitative assessment of each of these four motivations. The analysis focuses on how, when, and at what frequency Shevchuk used the 2006 sovereignty referendum to reach his objectives. Furthermore, the fifth subsection discusses three non-identified or unlikely motives.

Procuring Legitimacy of the Transnistrian Sovereignty Cause Internationally

According to the analysis of the official Transnistrian news, Shevchuk recalled the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum 28 (out of 125) times while talking to four international audiences: the West (mainly the European Union and its member states, and the United States), the United Nations, Ukraine, and the Eurasian de facto states (Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia). The Western audience was his main target due to the naturally critical position of the West toward pro-Russian separatist Transnistria and its participation in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict settlement (the European Union and the United States were observers in the negotiations; additionally, EU countries and the US were members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which served as a mediator in the negotiations, and an American was the head of the OSCE field mission to Moldova).

When Shevchuk was a speaker of the Transnistrian parliament, Western actors perceived him as a pragmatic and cooperative politician, which substantially contrasted with the perception of the then President Smirnov. Therefore, when Shevchuk took over presidency from Smirnov in December 2011, the West hoped for stabilization of the relationship between Transnistria and Moldova, and for the advancement in the Transnistrian conflict settlement, related to determining the status of Transnistria within reunified Moldova. Indeed, Shevchuk met the stabilization expectations, because Transnistrian-Moldovan relations normalized (although, until the autumn of 2012 when they deteriorated again) (Kosienkowski 2012, 36–48; Toderascu 2012; Végh 2012; Całus and Oleksy 2013).

However, Shevchuk did not meet the settlement expectations of the West. When he came to power, he quickly informed the Western audience that he would follow the will of the people expressed in the 2006 referendum, which excluded Transnistria's reintegration with Moldova (*Ol'viya-press* 2012c). He also added later that the referendum showed not only that Transnistrians wanted to live independently from Moldova but also that they wanted to be a part of the Russian civilization, while Moldovan governments, which sought European integration, wanted Moldova to be a part of the different Western civilization. Shevchuk repeated his position until the end of his

Table 1. Distribution of Shevchuk's motivations for recalling the 2006 referendum during his presidency

Motivation	International legitimacy	Empowerment against Moldova	Boosting relations with Russia	Domestic Empowerment
Number of occurrences (125 in total)	28	11	37	49

presidency when talking to Westerners about the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2015, 2016g).

Shevchuk underlined that only Transnistrians can decide on Transnistria's status, which they did casting their ballots in the 2006 poll. He suggested that the West should respect the will of people, invoking a norm of democracy, so valued and promoted by the Westerners, and a norm of self-determination. He also wanted the Westerners to not employ a double standards approach, saying that if the West recognized and supported the implementation of other referendums, including in Gibraltar, Kosovo, and Northern Cyprus, it should do the same in the case of the Transnistrian referendum (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2014g, 2014h). (It is debatable if this was a double standards approach; however, such a discussion is out of scope of this article.)

It is highly unlikely that Shevchuk believed that he would convince the West to recognize and support implementation of the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum with all these arguments. The point is that the West had a strictly conservative approach to territorial changes, with the exception of Kosovo, which, however, was considered a sui generis case. Instead, by referring to the poll, Shevchuk wanted to produce a degree of legitimacy and sympathy from the West for the Transnistrian sovereignty cause. Consequently, he expected the West to provide the Transnistrian de facto state with certain concessions and support. Among them, Shevchuk mentioned respecting the equality of the conflicting parties, preventing Moldova from pressurizing Transnistria and from raising an issue of Transnistria's future status within the united Moldova, and, instead, talking about "civilized divorce" during negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict settlement (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2015). Arguably, the referendum argument was Shevchuk's main legitimation tool with respect to the West. In principle, when contacting the representative of the United Nations, Shevchuk exploited the referendum similarly as in the case of the West (*Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2014e).

Shevchuk also used the 2006 referendum to generate legitimacy for the Transnistrian sovereignty cause from neighboring Ukraine, highlighting that the poll proved that Transnistria's independence was supported by the people (for example, *Ol'viya-press* 2012e). The point behind targeting the Ukrainian audience was that Ukraine was Transnistria's main window to the outside world and it needed to be permanently opened. Although the then Ukrainian government was pro-Russian and, consequently, friendly toward Transnistria, it nevertheless respected the March 2006 decision to help Moldova control Transnistrian export, which went mainly through the Transnistrian-Ukrainian border (Kosienkowski 2012, 30–35; Istomin and Bolgova 2016). It needs to be added that Shevchuk abandoned using the referendum argument vis-à-vis the Ukrainian audience in 2014 – that is, when Russia started its covert aggression against already pro-Western Ukraine. Apparently, it made no sense for pro-Russian Transnistria to seek legitimacy from Russian-invaded Ukraine (cf. Oleksy 2014).

Finally, Shevchuk used the 2006 referendum to demonstrate that Transnistria shared many similarities with the two Eurasian de facto states, that is, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These included gaining independence and establishing some form of close relationship with their patron, Russia, as shown by the results of the Transnistrian referendum (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2013b). The aim of targeting the audiences of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was to cultivate Transnistria's friendly relationship with these two Eurasian de facto states, which, in general, reminded us of the goal of producing legitimacy. Importantly, together with another Eurasian de facto state, that is, Nagorno-Karabakh (in Azerbaijan), they formed a micro-international community of "companions in misfortune" and jointly struggled for international legitimacy for their sovereignty causes (Isachenko 2012, 166; Kosienkowski 2012, 49–51).

Empowering Transnistria vis-à-vis Moldova

When Shevchuk came to power in December 2011, some kind of "honeymoon period" began in the relationship between Transnistria and Moldova. It was demonstrated by representatives of parties

who met frequently and worked together to resolve the socioeconomic problems that affected the lives of businessmen and ordinary people. Among others, it led to the resumption of all rail freight transport through Transnistria, which was stopped in 2006 (Kosienkowski 2012, 40–42). However, the "honeymoon period" ended in the fall of 2012, when Transnistrian-Moldovan relations began to deteriorate. One of the main reasons behind this was that Moldova made the resolution of socioeconomic problems conditional on discussing political issues, including determining the status of Transnistria within the unified Moldova, which Shevchuk did not want to do (Devyatkov and Kosienkowski 2012; Całus and Oleksy 2013). Since then and until the end of Shevchuk's presidency, negotiations on Transnistria's status were a bone of contention between Transnistria and Moldova.

To repel Moldova's demands to talk about Transnistria's status, Shevchuk exploited the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum. He said that there was no point in having such talks, because Transnistrians wanted to separate from Moldova, as demonstrated by the results of the poll. He also showed his intransigence on this issue. While acknowledging that the prospects of Transnistria's separation from Moldova were bleak, since even Russia, Transnistria's patron, did not support it, he underlined that people's will was the most important for him and that he would follow it regardless of circumstances. Overall then, he designated the will of people as a "red line," which he could not cross. Accordingly, he added that he could negotiate with the Moldovan government only on a "civilized divorce" between Transnistria and Moldova (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2012a, 2013d, 2016r).

Against this background, it is clear that Shevchuk used the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum to empower Transnistria against Moldova, which sought reintegration of its breakaway Transnistrian region. The referendum argument was an instrument that Transnistria probably most intensely used against Moldova. Although the analysis of the official Transnistrian news indicates that Shevchuk referred to the poll only 11 (out of 125) times with the purpose of empowerment, the *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* news agency claimed that he did it frequently when talking to Moldova's officials during negotiation meetings (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2013c).

Boosting Relations with Russia

Although Shevchuk had a good working relationship with Russian officials when he was the speaker of the Transnistrian parliament, he was not Russia's favorite during the presidential elections in December 2011 in Transnistria. Therefore, when he won the elections and became Transnistria's president against the will of the Russian authorities, he needed to gain their recognition as a legitimate leader of Transnistria. Moreover, he needed to calm their fears of Russia being pushed out from Transnistria, which were triggered by his pragmatic behavior toward the West and Moldova, something he adopted during his early presidency. All these were supposed to ensure the continuation of the flow of vital patronal support to Transnistria (Kosienkowski 2012, 27–29; Całus and Oleksy 2013; see also Kolstø 2021).

To achieve his goals, Shevchuk harnessed, among others, the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum, focusing on its "Russian element." Accordingly, Shevchuk told Russian interlocutors that he fully respected and agreed with people's will expressed in the referendum of Transnistria establishing some form of close relationship with Russia. More precisely, he mentioned maintaining close strategic cooperation with Russia and enhancing and developing relations with Russia, including in the framework of the Russia-led Eurasian integration. At the same time, he expressed hope that Russia would respond positively to people's desires and strengthen its relationship with Transnistria (for example, *Ol'viya-press* 2012a, 2012d, 2012f).

Shevchuk eventually managed to win Russia's heart in the spring/summer of 2012, probably also because of the exploit of the 2006 referendum argument (Kosienkowski 2012, 28–29). Soon, in autumn 2012, he generally subordinated his foreign policy to Russia's interests in the region,

restricting previously good working relations with the West and Moldova (Popescu and Litra 2012; Całus and Oleksy 2013; Kosienkowski 2013). He kept such an approach until the end of his presidency in 2016. During this period, he aimed to cultivate and boost relations with Russia to maintain and strengthen the vital support of Russia for Transnistria. Here, as the de facto state literature notes, the point is that a closer relationship with the patron and patronal support, both general and specific (i.e., related to a specific issue), cannot be taken for granted, especially if they do not directly serve the patron's interests. Instead, they must be actively sought by a client (Kosienkowski 2020; Pacher 2020).

Shevchuk used the "Russian element" of the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum to facilitate reaching his goals again. While talking to the Russian audience, Shevchuk said that the entire Transnistrian population – designated by him as the Transnistrian nation, which included not only ethnic Russians but also ethnic Moldovans and Ukrainians (about one-third of the population each), and not only Russian citizens (about 41 percent of the population in 2014, Nagashima 2019, 194) but also Transnistrian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian citizens – sought the establishment of some form of close relationship with Russia, including Transnistria cooperating closely with Russia, joining Russia-led Eurasian integration structures, or integrating with Russia. He underlined that this was clearly demonstrated by the results of the 2006 Transnistrian referendum. He implicitly and explicitly expressed his hope that the Russian authorities would take people's desires into account and finally satisfy them (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2013a, 2013f, 2016o).

It is unlikely that Shevchuk believed that Russia would establish any kind of formal relationship with Transnistria, including recognizing its independence, getting it involved in Eurasian integration, or annexing it, because it was virtually unattainable. Indeed, during Shevchuk's presidency, none of this happened. This is because Russia wanted Transnistria to be reunified with its Moldovan parent state such that Russia would anchor Moldova in the Russian exclusive influence sphere (Rogstad 2016; Kosienkowski 2020, 196–197). Therefore, Shevchuk most likely aimed to impress the Russian audience with a Russia-related referendum argument to deepen Transnistria's relations with Russia and get more Russian support for his de facto state (see, for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2016f, 2016o).

At other times, Shevchuk also said that the multi-ethnic Transnistrian population (or nation) considered itself a part of the Russian civilization (Russian World), which can be understood as "an imagined transnational community of people living primarily in the post-Soviet area and identifying themselves with Russia in various ways" (Kosienkowski 2021; see also Laruelle 2015; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2018). He substantiated his claim with the results of the 2006 poll, along with arguments that almost all Transnistrians are Russian speakers and Orthodox Christians, and that Transnistria was historically linked to Russia because it was part of the Russian Empire since the end of the 18th century and then of the Soviet Union (for example, *Ol'viya-press* 2012i; *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2013g, 2014a, 2016e). Arguably, the referendum argument was the most important here because it clearly showed the civilizational orientation of Transnistrians. By saying all this to the Russian audience, Shevchuk expected that Russia would keep protecting and endorsing its Transnistrian compatriots and would also further build up its support for them.

Moreover, while talking about the pro-Russian civilizational orientation of Transnistrians, which, as he underlined, was revealed in the 2006 referendum, Shevchuk also presented Transnistria as an outpost of the Russian civilization. Since 2014, he additionally cried that pro-Russian Transnistria was left between two fires, that is, pro-Western and unfriendly Moldova and Ukraine, but Transnistrians still kept their identity and political preferences (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2014d, 2016c). Consequently, he expected Russia to protect and support Transnistria and reward Transnistrians for their perseverance. Shevchuk also underlined that Transnistrians bravely defended not only Transnistria but also the Russian civilization and Russia itself against the West (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2014b, 2016a). This was supposed to produce even more Russian sympathy and support for Transnistria.

Shevchuk used all these arguments most intensely in 2014 and 2016. When it comes to 2014, it was due to the change of the regional geopolitical context, which Russia did not like, and which Shevchuk wanted to capitalize on. More precisely, the Moldovan authorities substantially advanced Moldova's integration with the EU by signing the Association Agreement in June 2014 (which they initialed in November 2013). It included an agreement on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade, which was supposed to also cover Transnistria as a part of Moldova. Furthermore, the pro-Western government took control in Ukraine in February 2014, to which Russia responded by annexing Crimea and covertly invading eastern Ukraine in spring 2014 (Całus 2016a; Całus and Kosienkowski 2018; Kosienkowski 2020).

When it comes to 2016, a more intense recall of the 2006 referendum was due to presidential elections, which Shevchuk wanted to participate in and win. He hoped that additional support to Transnistria, which he expected to be provided by Russia impressed by his referendum arguments, would improve his domestic rating (see also Całus 2016b; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2017). Shevchuk frequently referred to the 2006 referendum during his presidency to boost Transnistria's relations with Russia. The analysis of the Transnistrian news indicates that he did it 37 (out of 125) times.

Empowering Shevchuk Domestically

Yevgeniy Shevchuk unexpectedly but decisively beat his two main contenders, Igor Smirnov and Anatoliy Kaminskiy, in the December 2011 presidential elections. The former was the founding father of Transnistria and its first and the only (at that time) president. The latter was the speaker of the Transnistrian parliament and the leader of the main Transnistrian political party, Obnovleniye (Renewal), which was a political wing of the largest Transnistrian company, Sheriff. Importantly, he was also Russia's favorite in elections (Devyatkov and Kosienkowski 2013; Hale 2015, 220–227). Soon after taking over presidency, Shevchuk faced harsh criticism from Obnovleniye/Sheriff, endorsed by portions of Smirnov's supporters. They accused him of intending to surrender Transnistria to Moldova and replace Transnistria's allegiance to Russia with allegiance to the West. They substantiated their accusations with references to Shevchuk's good working relationship with Moldova and Western actors (Oleksy 2013).

Shevchuk engaged in refuting these allegations to maintain the support of the people he obtained during the presidential elections. Arguably, the referendum argument was the most powerful tool at his disposal. Therefore, he eagerly used it to empower himself domestically and consolidate his power. Consequently, while speaking to the domestic audience, Shevchuk underlined that he fully respected the will of people, which was expressed in the 2006 referendum, of Transnistria gaining independence and establishing some form of close relationship with Russia (for example, *Ol'viya-press* 2012b, 2012j). Then, he started to emphasize additionally that he would implement the people's will related to Transnistria's close relationship with Russia, which was revealed in the referendum, by getting Transnistria involved in the Russia-led Eurasian integration (for example, *Ol'viya-press* 2012g). As a result, he called the Eurasian integration the "national idea" of Transnistria and included it in November 2012 in the new concept of Transnistria's foreign policy (*Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2012b).

Due to the smearing campaign by the opposition Obnovleniye/Sheriff against Shevchuk and his proposal of a new "national idea" of Eurasian integration, Shevchuk's first year in office, 2012, was a period in which he frequently referred to the 2006 referendum while talking to the domestic audience. Then, he did it rarely between 2013 and 2015, because he took the wind out of the opposition's sails by changing his foreign policy to fully pro-Russian in autumn 2012. An even more important reason was that he reached an informal agreement of co-existence with Obnovleniye/Sheriff, which lasted approximately between mid-2013 and mid-2015 (Oleksy 2015). Then, in 2016, Shevchuk very intensely exploited the referendum again. Although it was the time of the tenth anniversary of the poll, the main reason for recalling it was not its commemoration but Shevchuk's desire to domestically empower himself to gain electoral advantage over his main contender, Vadim

Krasnoselskiy, in the forthcoming presidential elections of December 2016. Krasnoselskiy, then speaker of the Transnistrian parliament, was a presidential candidate of the opposition Obnovleniye/Sheriff (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2017).

Shevchuk desperately needed to gain electoral advantage because he had low popular support. It was mainly due to the dire socioeconomic situation in Transnistria. It can be best illustrated by the necessity that Shevchuk faced in 2015 to save de facto state budget funds by making 30 percent cuts to salaries and pensions of state employees and pensioners, who were numerous among Transnistrian voters. The socioeconomic situation had gradually worsened since he came to power at the end of 2011 due to his incompetent economic policy and his attempts to weaken and subordinate Sheriff. These included a 70 percent increase in 2013 in the price of natural gas, which was heavily consumed by the main Transnistrian companies and resulted in reducing or stopping their production and consequently their contribution to the de facto state budget. The socioeconomic situation also worsened due to external factors, including Russia's invasion of neighboring Ukraine in 2014, which resulted in restrictions of Russian financial support flows to Transnistria and a reduction in revenue from Transnistria trade with one of its main trade partners, Ukraine. As summarized by Całus (2015), who presented the socioeconomic situation in Transnistria during Shevchuk's presidency in more detail, the economy of Transnistria went from bad to worse.

In its turn, opposition Obnovleniye/Sheriff had money and, importantly, spent its portion on improving the life of Transnistrians, among others, by building social facilities, offering relatively cheap products in its various shops, and providing quite stable employment. This was what produced popular support for Obnovleniye/Sheriff and its presidential candidate, Krasnoselskiy. The unpopularity of Shevchuk was demonstrated by the November 2015 parliamentary elections, in which his favorites lost to Obnovleniye/Sheriff candidates, who won as many as 35 seats in the 43-seat parliament (Całus 2013, 2015, 2016b; Oleksy 2013, 2015; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2017).

The 2006 referendum was one of Shevchuk's main instruments for domestic empowerment ahead of the December 2016 presidential elections (see also Całus 2016b; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2017). While referring to the poll, he stressed its "Russian element." To recall, it was about Transnistria establishing some form of close relationship with Russia, which Shevchuk tended to decode during his presidential campaign as Transnistria integrating with Russia. It was not surprising, given that such an option was supported at that time by two-thirds of the respondents, while almost all designated Transnistria as a part of the Russian World (Toal and O'Loughlin 2016, 120; O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2016, 763–764).

To continue, Shevchuk underlined that he conducted Transnistria's foreign policy along with people's will expressed in the poll and boasted that Transnistria made advances to improve relations with Russia during his presidency (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2016b, 2016p). He said this, for example, during the lavishly celebrated tenth anniversary of the referendum (*Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2016n). Moreover, when the anniversary approached, he issued a decree about the implementation of its results. More precisely, the decree was about harmonizing Transnistrian law with Russian law, which Shevchuk presented as an important step to enhance the Transnistrian-Russian relations and prepare Transnistria for future integration with Russia. Then, he launched some institutional work to enact the bill (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2016k, 2016l). As such, Shevchuk used the 2006 referendum for direct domestic empowerment.

At the same time, Shevchuk criticized Obnovleniye/Sheriff for ignoring the will of people of Transnistria establishing some form of close relationship with Russia, which was revealed in the 2006 referendum, and for caring only about its own oligarchic interests. More precisely, he criticized the Obnovleniye/Sheriff-controlled Transnistrian parliament for adopting laws that mismatched the Russian law (and restricted his power directly or indirectly) and for rejecting his bills that conformed to the Russian law (and empowered him directly or indirectly). For example, the former included the law that gave the parliamentary speaker the right to sign laws, which used to be a presidential prerogative, whereas the latter included the law on MPs starting to work on a permanent professional basis, which was supposed to cut formal ties of the Obnovleniye MPs with

the Sheriff company (for example, *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2016h, 2016m, 2016q). It also happened that Shevchuk accused Obnovleniye/Sheriff of the same thing that this structure blamed him for in 2012, that is, intending to surrender Transnistria to Moldova (*Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2016j; see also *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2016i). Shevchuk thus used the 2006 referendum for indirect domestic empowerment by trying to weaken his political adversary.

Using intense references to the 2006 referendum ahead of the December 2016 presidential elections, Shevchuk wanted to firmly establish himself as the only actor that could satisfy people's sovereignty aspirations. At the same time, he wanted to distract people's attention from the dire economic situation. He hoped that all of this, complemented by other efforts, would help him win the imminent presidential elections. Overall, Shevchuk employed the 2006 referendum for the same purpose as his predecessor, Smirnov, who decided to organize the poll ahead of presidential balloting ten years earlier. However, unlike Smirnov, Shevchuk was decisively defeated by the Obnovleniye/Sheriff candidate, Krasnoselskiy, who became the next president of Transnistria (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2017). Generally, according to the analysis of the official Transnistrian news, Shevchuk referred to the 2006 referendum as many as 49 (out of 125) times to empower himself domestically during his presidency between 2011 and 2016.

Non-Identified and Unlikely Motives

Among possible but not identified motives of Shevchuk behind recalling the 2006 sovereignty referendum was ensuring unity for the Transnistrian sovereignty cause internally. Indeed, Shevchuk did not need to foster the unity of Transnistrians on this issue. According to survey polls conducted by Toal and O'Loughlin (2016, 120) in July 2010 and December 2014, very few Transnistrians supported the reintegration of Transnistria with Moldova (about 14 percent in 2010 and 1 percent in 2014). The most popular option was Transnistria's integration with Russia (supported by nearly half of the respondents in 2010 and two-thirds in 2014), followed by Transnistria maintaining its independence (supported by one-third of the respondents in 2010 and one-fifth of them in 2014). In fact, these two options could be combined because they were acceptable as the second-best solution for both respective groups, and there was no rivalry between them. As noted by the former Transnistrian Foreign Minister, Vladimir Yastrebchak (2014, 69), integration with Russia could be seen as "gaining independence of a new type," while, according to the December 2014 survey poll, almost all Transnistrians designated Transnistria as part of the Russian World (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2016, 763–764).

Another possible but unlikely motivation of Shevchuk for recalling the 2006 referendum was meeting demands of the patron of Transnistria, Russia. To be sure, there was a case where Shevchuk may have been driven by such a motive. Shortly after Moldova initiated the Association Agreement with the EU in Vilnius in November 2013, Shevchuk drafted a bill giving a precedence of the Russian law over the Transnistrian law in Transnistria. Importantly, he called it an implementation of people's will, expressed in the 2006 referendum, of Transnistria establishing some form of relationship with Russia (*Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2013e). He might have drafted this bill at a request from Russia, which did not like Moldova's advance in European integration and took various steps to hinder this process, including by exploiting Transnistria. The aim of Russia may have been to convince the EU, including its member states, to stop enhancing cooperation with Moldova to avoid further rift between Transnistria and Moldova and subsequent destabilization of the region (see Kosienkowski 2020, 188). However, in light of the then overzealous pro-Russian policy of Shevchuk, his decision to draft the bill was most likely his own attempt to decode and satisfy Russia's interests and get some reward for that (see Kosienkowski 2013). In such a case, it means that he was motivated by a desire to boost the relationship with Russia to the benefit of Transnistria.

The final possible but unlikely motive of Shevchuk behind the recall of the 2006 sovereignty referendum was the facilitation of Transnistria's de facto integration with a patron. To be sure, Shevchuk may have been driven by such a motivation in 2014. According to some accounts (see, for

example, Całus 2014), he hoped Transnistria would share the fate of Crimea, which was annexed by Russia in March 2014 with reference to the will of Crimeans expressed in the sovereignty referendum that took place two days before the annexation. Shevchuk did not have a new referendum at his disposal but could use the old one from 2006, which proposed the establishment of some form of relationship between Transnistria and Russia, including Transnistria's integration with Russia. Indeed, when welcoming Crimea's annexation, Shevchuk noted that the results of the Transnistrian and Crimean referendums were almost the same (*Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2014c).

However, it was very unlikely that Shevchuk wanted Transnistria's de facto integration with a patron because it would put his political and economic interests in danger. This included restricting his opportunity to misappropriate Russia's assistance to Transnistria, allegedly related to the distribution of Russian natural gas and humanitarian support (see, for example, Całus 2014; *Jurnal.md* 2016; Tkhorik, Tuzlova, and Zvarish 2017) because it would probably be put under tighter control by the Russian central authorities. This even included removing him from the presidential post by the Russian central authorities, which would be relatively easy to do (Całus 2014). Furthermore, unlike in the case of Crimea, Russia did not appear to be interested in annexing Transnistria (Rogstad 2016; Dembińska and Mérand 2019, 22).

This means that Shevchuk had no sense in recalling the 2006 sovereignty referendum with the aim of facilitating Transnistria's de facto integration with Russia (see Kolstø 2014). It must have been as clear to him as it was to the Transnistrian parliamentarians, who asked the Russian authorities in mid-April 2014 "only" for the recognition of Transnistria, although earlier, in mid-March 2014, they allegedly signaled their desire for Transnistria to be incorporated into Russia (*Kommersant* 2014). Moreover, it was publicly communicated to Transnistrians, including Shevchuk, by one of Russia's senior officials (*Novosti Pridnestrov'ya* 2014f; cf. Całus 2014). Against this background, it appears that Shevchuk was most likely driven by his desire to attract Russia's attention and boost Transnistria's relationship with Russia when he recalled the 2006 Transnistrian sovereignty referendum in the context of Crimea's annexation.

Going Beyond President Shevchuk's Use of the Referendum

This article argued that Transnistria's President, Shevchuk, recalled and re-exploited the Transnistrian unilateral sovereignty referendum of 2006 during his presidency in 2011–2016. Analysis of the Transnistrian official news indicated that he used the referendum for: 1. procuring legitimacy of the Transnistrian sovereignty cause internationally; 2. empowering Transnistria vis-à-vis its parent state, Moldova; 3. boosting relations with the patron of Transnistria, Russia; and 4. empowering himself domestically. At the same time, there was no or little evidence that he used the poll for other possible purposes, such as 1. ensuring unity for the sovereignty cause internally; 2. meeting a patron's demands; and 3. facilitating de facto integration with a patron. What deserves further examination is whether and to what extent any of the four uses of the referendum by Shevchuk worked in reality (certainly, the exploitation of the referendum for domestic empowerment to gain electoral advantage in the 2016 presidential elections did not work because Shevchuk suffered a decisive defeat and lost power).

Although this study focused on the case of President Shevchuk, the argument about the strategic use of past unilateral sovereignty referendums appears to work also in the cases of other political actors in Transnistria. The Transnistrian parliament from the time of Shevchuk's presidency is a case in point. For example, the parliament asked Russia and the international community in mid-April 2014, that is, shortly after Russian annexation of Crimea, to recognize Transnistria to satisfy people's desires expressed in the 2006 referendum. It probably made such a request and referred to the poll to produce international legitimacy, boost relationship with Russia, and domestically empower Obnovleniye/Sheriff, which controlled the parliament (see Verkhovnyy Sovet PMR 2014).

The 2006 referendum was also strategically used by President Krasnoselskiy, who succeeded Shevchuk in the presidential post in 2016 and represented Obnovleniye/Sheriff. For instance, his foreign minister said to the Russian news agency in July 2022, that is, during the Russian full-scale invasion on neighboring Ukraine, that Transnistria still sought independence and subsequent integration with Russia, following the people's will as revealed in the 2006 referendum (*RIA Novosti* 2022). He probably made such a statement and recalled the poll to impress Russia (which lost much support among the international community due to its invasion of Ukraine) – and consequently to make it boost its relationship with Transnistria – and to please pro-Russian Transnistrians to empower President Krasnoselskiy and Obnovleniye/Sheriff domestically (Całus 2022).

The past unilateral sovereignty referendums seem to be used also outside the Transnistrian context, that is, in the case of other de facto states. This includes Abkhazia and its 1999 constitutional/independence poll. Among others, Abkhazia's Foreign Ministry recalled it in September 2017 probably to produce international legitimacy, taking advantage of the forthcoming Catalonian independence referendum, which was allegedly supposed to be recognized by the EU (MID Abkhazii 2017). The ministry pursued the same goal of producing international legitimacy when it commemorated each year the 1999 act of state independence, emphasizing that it was adopted in the aftermath of the above-mentioned poll (MID Abkhazii 2019).

Furthermore, the argument about the strategic use of past unilateral sovereignty referendums also appears to work in the case of sub-state entities. This includes Gagauzia, which is Moldova's autonomous region and a former de facto state. Its governor, Irina Vlah, referred between 2015 and 2020 to the 2014 poll in which 98.4 percent of the voters expressed support for Russia-led Eurasian integration (instead of European integration promoted by Moldova's central authorities) and 98.9 percent of them expressed support for Gagauzia's independence if Moldova lost its sovereignty (that could result from the union of Moldova with Romania, but also from further integration with the EU). She recalled the referendum probably to please pro-Russian and Eurosceptic Gagauzians to empower herself domestically and to empower Gagauzia with respect to the Moldovan central authorities (*Nokta.md* 2023).

Indeed, past unilateral sovereignty referendums have already taken place, and they are readily available to be recalled and re-exploited. In addition, they offer clear results and can be reinterpreted along with the needs of political actors. Clearly, a closer examination of other cases is needed to verify a claim about strategic use of past sovereignty polls by political actors in de facto states and sub-state entities. The analytical framework presented in the conceptual section of this article will be helpful. In addition, this framework could be expanded to include how specific circumstances shape the strategic use of past sovereignty referendums. Here, the empirical insights from the examination of other cases and the conceptual works of Patrick T. Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon on relationalism (Jackson and Nexon 1999; Jackson 2017) will be beneficial.

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