

“Democracy” in Unrecognized States: Its Variations and Determinants

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Abstract

The term “unrecognized states” refers to entities that have declared independence but lack international recognition while operating independently from their legal parent state. In recent years, with Russia’s invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, unrecognized states and similar entities have emerged, drawing attention to their roles. Many of these existing entities conduct competitive elections, with some even experiencing change of government through elections. However, most of them rely on support from authoritarian states and face severe economic and societal conditions that hinder democratization. Consequently, some studies suggest the existence of unique factors influencing democratization in unrecognized states. According to measures of democracy, however, not all unrecognized states have fully democratized, as there are variations in the quality of democratization among them. This paper reviews the current political regimes in unrecognized states, along with existing research in the field, and identifies the limitations, while proposing new possibilities for hypotheses.

1. The Issue at Hand: "Democracy" in the Unrecognized States?

Since the end of the Cold War, there have been several instances of "unrecognized states" that have declared independence and achieved de facto independence from their parent states,¹ yet have received little international recognition. In recent years, as exemplified by the 2014 unilateral declarations of independence by the "Republic of Crimea," followed by the "Donetsk People's Republic" and the "Luhansk People's Republic" during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the phenomenon of unrecognized states has been brought to the forefront.

Many unrecognized states have achieved de facto independence after ethnic conflicts and similar struggles, and have managed to survive with the substantial military, economic, and political patronage of regional great powers, such as Russia and Turkey, that are in confrontation with the legal parent states of the unrecognized states (Hirose 2014). Notably, regional powers play crucial roles in supporting unrecognized states, and when a regional power becomes a patron state providing strong support such as state recognition, the unrecognized state gains a robust foundation (Caspersen 2015, 189).

Various discussions have arisen regarding the definition and nomenclature of entities referred to as "unrecognized states," "unacknowledged states," or "de facto states."² However, this study adopts the systematic definition proposed by Caspersen, which includes the following criteria (Caspersen 2012, 11)³:

¹ Refers to the state from which an unrecognized state declares its independence. The parent state is widely recognized by the international community as having sovereignty over the territory controlled by the unrecognized state.

² Various debates have developed over designations and definitions (Pegg 1998, 26–42; Togashi 2015, 80–85; Hirose 2014, 84–87). The reason for using the translation "非承認国家" rather than "未承認国家" here is to avoid the misunderstanding that the word "unrecognized" contains the nuance of "to be recognized in the future." (Translator's note: The original version of this paper is written in Japanese and herein the author is discussing the Japanese wording of unrecognized states. In Japanese, "非" means "not" and "未" means "not yet.")

³ This definition excludes local warlords who effectively govern on a state-like basis, entities that aspire to autonomy within the federation (such as Puntland), and the Western Sahara, which has a small effective area of control.

- An unrecognized state has achieved de facto independence, covering at least two-thirds of the territory to which it lays claim and including its main city and key regions.⁴
- Its leadership is seeking to build further state institutions and demonstrate its own legitimacy.
- The entity has declared formal independence or demonstrated clear aspirations for independence, for example through an independence referendum, adoption of a separate currency or similar act that clearly signals separate statehood.
- The entity has not gained international recognition or has, at the most, been recognized by its patron state and a few other states of no great importance.
- It has existed for at least two years.

Based on the definition, the currently existing unrecognized states as of June 2023 are presented in Table 1.⁵

Many unrecognized states have been widely regarded as puppet states of authoritarian patron states, such as Russia and Turkey, or entities with little or no political pluralism (Lemke and Crabtree 2020; Lynch 2004). However, as shown in Table 1, competitive elections are held in most existing unrecognized states, each claiming to be a democratic state (Caspersen 2011b). In many of them, electoral changes of government have occurred (Caspersen 2011b, 73–74; Pegg 2017, 9). In Taiwan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in particular, parliamentary democracy is mostly entrenched, while Somaliland, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Abkhazia are rated more democratic than their legal parent and patron countries (Hirose 2014, 104–106).

⁴ However, Taiwan, which claims to represent all of China, is included as a non-recognized state because it has established legal, administrative, and diplomatic relations only with the areas currently under its effective control.

⁵ Note that, according to Caspersen's definition, de facto states that have disappeared since the end of the Cold War include Bougainville, Chechen Republic, Republika Srpska, Republika Kraina Srpska, Tamil Eelam, and Gagauz. In addition to the 11 in Table 1, Florea (2014), who also compiled a data set of "de facto states," included Western Sahara, Palestine, Gaza, Karen and Kahin in Myanmar, Mindanao in the Philippines, Cabinda in Angola, Kazamance in Senegal, Puntland in Somalia, and the Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, these states do not fit the definition used in this paper.

Table 1: Existing unrecognized states and their competitive election practices

Unrecognized State	Parent State	“Independence”	Timing of the introduction of national elections, and their subjects	Patron State ⁶
Taiwan ⁷	China	(1912)	1996, governor-general and parliament	N/A
Northern Cyprus	Cyprus	1983	1975, president and parliament	Turkey
Transnistria	Moldova	1990	1990, president and parliament	Russia
Somaliland	Somalia	1991	2003, president and parliament	N/A
South Ossetia	Georgia	1992	1990, president and parliament	Russia
Abkhazia	Georgia	1992	1999, president and parliament	Russia
Nagorno-Karabakh	Azerbaijan	1992	1996, president and parliament	Armenia
Kosovo ⁸	Serbia	2008	2007, president and parliament	N/A
Kurdistan	Iraq	2017	1992, president and parliament	N/A

Entities shaded in gray have experienced change of government.

Source: Adapted by the author from Caspersen (2012) and Hirose (2014).

Notably, even in elections in Transnistria and Abkhazia, where the patron state is the particularly authoritarian Russia, candidates who often go

⁶ Patron state is a very vague concept as it refers to all countries that provide support of some kind, but for the purposes of this paper, the term is limited to countries that have troops stationed in the country.

⁷ Taiwan was once a permanent member of the UN Security Council as the “Republic of China,” and as of July 2023, 12 UN member states as well as the Vatican and the “Republic of Somaliland” still recognize Taiwan as a state, and Taiwan maintains official and unofficial relations with many countries and international organizations.

⁸ As of July 2023, the Republic of Kosovo has been recognized as a state by 88 UN member state (including Japan), the Cook Islands, and Niue. However, since Serbia has not recognized its independence and half of the UN member states have not yet done so, it is treated as an unrecognized state for the purposes of this paper and according to the definition by Caspersen et al.

against the wishes of the patron state have been elected (Caspersen 2011a; Matsuzato 2008). In 2022, pro-Russian incumbent Anatoly Bibilov was defeated by an opposition candidate in the "presidential election" in South Ossetia, the entity which has been seen as particularly amenable to Russia (Hirose 2022).

Freedom House (hereafter referred to as FH), which evaluates the Political Rights and Civil Liberties of each country, covers some unrecognized countries. The indicators as of 2023 for the unrecognized states covered by FH are shown in Table 2.⁹ Both FH indicators take values from 1 to 7, with 1 being the most liberal and 7 being the least liberal. The countries are classified as "Free (F)," "Partly Free (PF)," or "Not Free (NF)" according to both indicators.

Although datasets such as Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)¹⁰ and Polity V¹¹ are widely used as indicators of political regimes and the quality of democracy, this paper adopts the FH indicators because indicators other than those of Freedom House cover only sovereign states that are widely recognized internationally and do not include most unrecognized states.¹²

Table 2: List of unrecognized states and FH indicators as of 2023 (limited to those included in the FH listings)

Unrecognized State	Parent State	Patron State	Political Rights	Civil Rights	FH Evaluation
Abkhazia	Georgia	Russia	5	5	PF
Nagorno-Karabakh	Azerbaijan	Armenia	5	5	PF
Northern Cyprus	Cyprus	Turkey	3	2	F
Somaliland	Somalia	N/A	4	4	PF
South Ossetia	Georgia	Russia	7	6	NF
Transnistria	Moldova	Russia	6	6	NF
Taiwan	China	N/A	1	1	F
Kosovo	Serbia	N/a	3	4	PF

Source: Author's compilation based on Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2023."

⁹ Freedom House. "Freedom in the World." <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>, 18 July 2023.

¹⁰ Variety of Democracy. "The V-Dem Dataset." <https://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>, 18 July 2023.

¹¹ Center for Systemic Peace. "The Polity Project." <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>, 18 July 2023.

¹² Exceptions include Taiwan and Somaliland in some variables of V-Dem, and Taiwan in Polity.

Table 2 shows that among the unrecognized states, there are differences in the FH evaluation. Among them, it is noteworthy that not only Taiwan and Kosovo, but also Somaliland (which is not internationally recognized at all), Abkhazia (which is supported by Russia which is rated as not free), and Northern Cyprus (which is supported by Turkey) receive some positive evaluation for political rights.

As examined, many of the unrecognized states hold competitive elections, and some are even more democratic than their legal parent or patron state. For this reason, rather than simply treating unrecognized states as puppet regimes of their patron countries, it is necessary to examine their political regimes in the same way as sovereign states.

However, the "democratization" of an unrecognized state is a phenomenon that is difficult to conceive of in terms of conventional democratization theory.

For example, it is widely explained that democratization is triggered by economic development, growing inequality due to rapid economic development, and the activation of the civil society sphere (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Almond and Verba 1963; Ansell and Samuels 2014; Boix 2003; Gasirowski and Power 1998; Inglehart 1990; Lipset 1959; Przeworski et al. 2000; Putnam 1993). However, all the unrecognized states other than Taiwan have low economic levels and limited civil society activities.

Unrecognized states are often "independent" after experiencing war, and some studies (e.g., Huang 2016) suggest that state-building through conflict or insurgent governance during the civil war can lead to democratization. However, this explanation cannot be directly applied to the unrecognized states because the competitiveness of their elections increased long after they had been established.

It has been suggested that ethnic homogeneity is a positive factor in democratization and unrecognized states are often thought to be mono-ethnic; however, unrecognized states such as Transnistria and Abkhazia are multi-ethnic (Matsuzato 2008). In Somaliland, the Somalis, who make up most of its residents, are internally divided into numerous clans, and the situation is not conducive to the formation of a state based on a single ethnic group (Bradbury 2008, 13–15; Endo 2015; Lewis 1993, 47).¹³

¹³ Although they share the same language, religion, and ethnicity, conflicts between clans, which are subgroups within the ethnic group, have been intense, and armed clashes occurred in 1993.

In addition to the domestic factors of democratization described above, some scholars have argued, as an international factor, the "spillover effect" of democratization in neighboring countries (Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Huntington 1991). However, the neighboring, patron, or legal parent states of unrecognized states are non-democracies in most cases, and there is little democratization in the neighbors that could have an impact.¹⁴

It has also been pointed out that ties to advanced Western democracies and to emerging democracies that have experienced democratization, as well as support for democratization by these countries, can also influence political regimes (Ikenberry 1999; Levitsky and Way 2010; Sugiura 2010). However, except for Taiwan and Kosovo, unrecognized states have rarely had ties with the West; rather, connections have persisted with Russia and other countries that do not promote democratization as their main patrons (Hirose 2014). Russia and these other countries are usually described as hindering democracy support and "exporting authoritarianism" (Diamond, Platner, and Walker 2016; Risse and Babayan 2015; Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2016). Given this, the international factors traditionally identified in democratization studies also do not apply to most unrecognized states.

Thus, most unrecognized states are not at all subject to the numerous factors that would be considered democratizing according to the traditional framework of democratization research. Why, then, do unrecognized states hold competitive elections, and why are some of them democratic to some degree? The following sections offer a review of the existing literature on this question and point out the issues involved.

2. Status of unrecognized states and motivation for "democratization"

In traditional democratization theory, the existence of an external sovereignty has been a prerequisite and has been treated as the necessary condition for democratization (Linz and Stepan 1996, 17–19). For this reason, there has been little research on the political regimes of unrecognized states that have not established international sovereignty; however, recent research has made progress on the "democratization" or "quality of democracy," elections, and parliaments of unrecognized states.

¹⁴ As an exception, the 2004 presidential election in Abkhazia is seen by some as a spillover from the "color revolution." However, the political processes before and after were not linked to those in other "color revolution" states, thereby making it difficult to explain them solely in terms of spillover effects (Ó Beacháin 2012).

Tansey (2010) theorized the relationship between the status of unrecognized states' lack of external sovereignty and democratization. Tansey referred to Stephen Krasner's discussion of the concept of "sovereignty," which Krasner (1999) divided into four elements, and argued that although traditional democratization theories have assumed the statehood and sovereignty of the democratizing subject, sovereignty has diverse aspects and not all of them are necessary for democracy. In other words, Tansey argued that international legal sovereignty, as Krasner called it, is not a necessary condition for democracy, and that it is quite possible for countries like Somaliland and Taiwan to become democracies. However, he qualified this by asserting that in the context of the absence of international legal sovereignty, there exists a precarious position wherein autonomy from foreign intervention is threatened. As such, the quality of democracy may be influenced by the lack of external sovereignty.

Subsequently, beyond Tansey's assertion that democratization is possible even in unrecognized states, it has been suggested that the less legitimate status of unrecognized states is itself a democratization-promoting factor. This group of studies explains competitive elections and democratization as occurring as a means of acquiring external legitimacy or as a compromise between elites in the region.

Caspersen (2011b), using examples such as the website of the government of the Republic of Transnistria, states that most unrecognized states promote democratic governance structures as a means of demonstrating that they function as effective states to improve their international standing, including by winning state recognition.

Voller (2015) also argues that unrecognized states are always in a "crisis of legitimacy" due to their international legal status and that the following two actions taken to secure legitimacy are incentives for democratization specific to unrecognized states. First is continued engagement with other states and international organizations to secure international legitimacy; and second, such states seek the will of transnational advocacy, outside donors, and the diaspora.

Similarly, Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2012) point to Nagorno-Karabakh as implementing seemingly "democratic" institutions and competition as part of its external appeal against its authoritarian legal parent, Azerbaijan.

In general, these studies have made a common argument that the internationally less legitimate status of unrecognized states is an incentive to choose democratization as a means of appeal to secure international legitimacy.

3. Limitations of "democratization" as a foreign strategy

However, it is extremely unlikely that the democratization of unrecognized states improves their legitimacy and status in the international community and helps gain state recognition.

The Republic of Kosovo is an example of a country that has gained wide international recognition after holding elections and referendums. However, it should be noted that the acquisition of widespread international recognition cannot be solely attributed to the electoral process. Instead, Western countries and other allies, with whom Kosovo had pre-existing close relations, recognized the statehood declaration following the referendum. As a result, the direct impact of the elections on international status remains inconclusive (Fabry 2012; Ryngaert and Sobrie 2011). Eritrea and Timor-Leste are the only other examples of entities that have gained international recognition after the end of the Cold War, although the dictatorship of Isaias Afewerki has been in power in Eritrea since independence. Considering these examples, it is unlikely that democratization would be helpful for state recognition.

The international community has not welcomed the act of unrecognized states conducting elections without the consent of the parent country. Furthermore, international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have condemned these actions as "illegitimate." In addition, few external actors exert intense pressure for democratization on unrecognized states whose very existence is not recognized. In other words, there are no examples of unrecognized states improving their international standing through democratization, and such prospects remain bleak.

In addition, the governments of unrecognized states are often aware of the great difficulty in gaining recognition. Indeed, many unrecognized states have developed initiative-taking "foreign" policies, but often without the unrealistic goal of gaining state recognition (Geldenhuys 2009, 218–23; Togashi 2015, 235–43).

As discussed above, the argument that the unorthodox status of unrecognized states is a direct factor in democratization is less than convincing.

In the first place, these studies assume that unrecognized states are "democratizing," but as the FH indicators discussed in the previous section make clear, not all unrecognized states are democratizing. For example, FH cites the low ratings of South Ossetia and Transnistria, among others, for

intervention in elections by the unrecognized states themselves or by the governments of their patron states. In addition, one study introduces the case of Northern Cyprus, where the patron state, Turkey, intervened in the parliamentary debate on governance reform, pointing out that unrecognized states are susceptible to intervention from patron countries (Kanol and Köprülü 2017).

Other scholars argue that the motivation for unrecognized states to hold competitive elections is not to democratize the country, but rather to lock domestic elites into the issue of state “independence” through limited competitive elections in order to maintain a competitive authoritarian regime (MacQueen 2015; Protsyk 2009). However, the mechanisms through which the implementation of limited elections incorporates the political elite within the state are not necessarily clear.

As described above, on the one hand, studies have been conducted on the assumption that unrecognized states are “democratizing” and have discussed democratization factors specific to unrecognized states; while on the other hand, it has been repeatedly pointed out that competitive elections in unrecognized states do not necessarily lead to “democratization.”

The reason these two extremes have erupted and have not converged is that both arguments equate units that share the special status of unrecognized states and fail to adequately examine the differences among them. However, as discussed in the previous section, there are significant differences in the political systems of unrecognized states. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the factors that define the differences among them, while paying sufficient attention to the special status of unrecognized states. In other words, it is necessary to explore not the constant “status of unrecognized states,” but the variables that exist among unrecognized states and determine their political outcomes.

4. Conclusion: Challenges unrecognized states face and possible new hypotheses

This paper has examined the varieties of “democracy” in unrecognized states, provided an overview of previous studies that explain the “democratizing” factors and their limitations, and pointed out the challenges these studies face. Based on the above discussion, this concluding section explores questions for future research.

As mentioned earlier, existing studies on the political regimes of unrecognized states have often given insufficient attention to the internal differences among these states in keeping the focus on their special status as unrecognized states.

However, the number of cases and amount of data on unrecognized states are not sufficient to conduct quantitative analysis and qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), as is often used in comparative studies of political regimes to identify the factors that determine such differences. Here, in considering the triggers for governments of unrecognized states to hold competitive elections, it can be useful to examine the challenges faced not only by unrecognized states but also by states with precarious positions at home and abroad, i.e., newly established states and similar entities in general.

The challenges faced by newly independent states are diverse, but among the most significant are those of state-building and nation-building. Particularly in emerging independent countries comprising multiple ethnic groups, the sense of belonging to a particular ethnicity is stronger than identification with the nation. National integration in a way that transcends these fissures is a critical issue for maintaining national stability and independence (Deutsch 1966; Hoefte and Veenendaal 2019).

Notably, when there is a conflict between the core ethnic group at the center of the government that leads to the independence of the country, and other ethnic groups, national integration inclusive of both is a major challenge (Mylonas 2013). This is because such ethnic groups are likely to raise various objections to the very foundations of the nation, such as opposition to independence, the territory, political system, and so forth. To curb such opposition, the new nation must achieve integrated nation-building in a manner that transcends ethnic and regional cleavages.

The above challenges are likely to be especially significant for unrecognized states whose independence has not been recognized by the international community, including the legal parent states. This is because, first, unrecognized states are established through conflicts. Furthermore, as pointed out in Section 1, they often contain many ethnic groups, including the core ethnic group of the legal parent state. Second, because of their precarious status, with little recognition of their "independence" by the international community, they may also have domestic groups that do not recognize their legitimacy.

It has often been pointed out that the implementation of competitive elections has the effect of promoting and dividing ethnic nationalism within

a country (Fjelde and Höglund 2018; Mann 2004; Mansfield and Snyder 2002). Some studies however suggest that under special conditions, elections can be the means of nation-building and national integration (Nakai 2019; Nakai and Higashijima 2012). Reexamining the impact of elections on state-building and national integration, especially in the case of unrecognized states where the urgency of these issues is high, would contribute to the overall development of comparative political science.

In addition, recent research on competitive authoritarian regimes has pointed out the possibility that the conduct of competitive elections is a means of maintaining and strengthening the regime, through the inclusion and fragmentation of opposition forces as well as information gathering (Magaloni 2006; Imai 2017; Higashijima 2022).

Further, the importance of the challenges faced by these regimes may differ among unrecognized states, depending on their historical background and relationships with neighboring states. Theoretically questioning the relationship between the variables that could define such differences among unrecognized states and elections is an important research agenda for understanding the internal circumstances of unrecognized states that have shown importance in recent conflicts, as well as the politics of developing countries more broadly.

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