Discourse as a Mechanism of Political Power Legitimation in de facto States of the Post-Soviet Space

Ana CRIȘAVIȚCHI[*]

Abstract

The persistence of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space has led to the emergence of de facto states – entities that exercise effective political control while lacking international recognition. In the absence of external legal legitimacy, these regimes rely on discourse as a central compensatory mechanism, employing identity-based, historical, and security narratives to secure internal acceptance and to project the image of a "functional state" externally. Against this backdrop, this article examines the role of political and media discourse in the legitimation of power in de facto states, focusing on the strategies through which political elites construct collective identity, define alterity, and justify the existing political order.

Keywords: *political power legitimation; de facto state; discourse analysis; post-Soviet space; contested sovereignty*

1. Introduction

The persistence and reactivation of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, amplified by the increasingly pronounced competition between Russia and the West, make de facto states not merely "legal anomalies" but actors with a direct impact on regional security and the international order (Markedonov, 2021). The literature shows that, despite growing academic interest, research remains

[*] PhD Student, Doctoral School of Social Sciences, Moldova State University, Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, Corresponding author: ana.crisavitchi@gmail.com

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

fragmented and dominated either by legal-normative approaches or by security analyses, with insufficient attention paid to the internal mechanisms of legitimation and to the discursive dimension of power in these regimes (Markedonov, 2021; Yemelianova, 2015).

The relevance of the topic is reinforced by the renewed dynamism of the post-Soviet space after 2014 and especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has called into question the very notion of a "frozen conflict" and reconfigured the "universe" of Eurasian de facto states (Dembińska, 2023). At the same time, the durability of these entities cannot be explained solely by military or economic factors: political identity and loyalty to the regime are identified as central resources of internal sovereignty (Kolosov, 2022). This observation raises the question of the symbolic and discursive mechanisms through which such legitimacy is produced and sustained.

Concurrently, studies in political discourse analysis have shown that language is not a neutral medium but an instrument of power through which political realities are constructed, authority is legitimated, and hierarchies are naturalized (Gurbanov, 2025). Recent research on post-Soviet de facto states demonstrates that elites "perform" statehood through a combination of historical, cultural, democratic, and security narratives, consistently repeated in political and media discourse (Dembińska, 2023; Fartan & Bouris, 2025).

Against this background, the present research seeks to capitalize on the convergence between studies of de facto states and political discourse analysis, in order to address a need identified in the literature: understanding how political and media discourse contributes to the construction and maintenance of the legitimacy of unrecognized regimes. The main aim of the study is to analyse, through the lens of discourse, the strategies by which elites in post-Soviet de facto states construct collective identity, define alterity (the parent state, external actors, "the West"), and justify the existing political order, both in relation to their own societies and to external audiences.

2. Research Methodology

The research adopts a mixed methodological approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods in order to capture the complex and multidimensional character of the processes of political power legitimation in the de facto states of the post-Soviet space. The choice of this approach is determined by the specific nature of the object of study, situated at the intersection of political science, international

relations, security studies, and discourse analysis, as well as by the legal and symbolic ambiguity that characterizes these entities.

The central method of the research is political and media discourse analysis, used to examine the mechanisms through which political elites in de facto states construct, justify, and reproduce the legitimacy of power in the absence of international recognition. Legitimacy is approached as a social and symbolic process, in line with the Weberian tradition, and is analysed through the identity-based, historical, security, and democratic narratives promoted in public discourse.

Discourse analysis is applied to an extensive corpus of primary sources, including official documents (constitutions, domestic legislation, political programmes, leaders' statements), mass-media materials controlled by or affiliated with the authorities (news reports, editorials, political broadcasts), as well as school textbooks and historical publications (Blåkkisrud & Kolstø, 2011; Roper, 2004; Constitution of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, n.d.). This diversity of sources makes it possible to identify both long-term legitimation strategies and the concrete technologies used to consolidate internal acceptance and to project statehood externally.

The case-study method is used to analyse in depth the case of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, considered relevant and representative of the category of de facto states in the post-Soviet space. The case study allows the discursive dimension of legitimacy to be correlated with the institutional, political, and social realities specific to this context, avoiding excessive generalization and favouring a nuanced interpretation of the phenomenon (Cornea, 2018; German & Bayramov, 2019).

In addition, the comparative method is applied in an auxiliary role, by relating the findings obtained to other de facto states in the region, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Nagorno-Karabakh. This approach facilitates the identification of recurring elements of the legitimation discourse, as well as of the differences determined by geopolitical factors, patronage relations, and distinct historical contexts (Bakhturidze & Vasilyeva, 2020).

Complementarily, the research may integrate auxiliary quantitative methods, such as the statistical analysis of available secondary data and the frequency analysis of key terms in public discourse, using textual-processing software tools. These techniques contribute to validating and consolidating the qualitative interpretations, providing additional indications of the priorities and discursive emphases of political legitimacy (Pegg, 1998).

The triangulation of the methods used enhances the robustness and reliability of the results, allowing a coherent analysis of discourse as a mechanism of political power legitimation and offering a methodological framework applicable to other cases of contested sovereignty in the post-Soviet space.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis confirms that, in the de facto states of the post-Soviet space, political and media discourse constitutes a central mechanism of power legitimation, compensating for the absence of international recognition. Legitimacy is not produced exclusively through institutional or coercive control, but is constructed and maintained through narratives that confer meaning, continuity, and justification upon the existing political order.

The findings of the research show that the political elites of these entities use discourse to construct collective identity, to delimit "alterity" – the parent state, external actors, or "the West" – and to present themselves as guarantors of security and stability. Through the repetition and institutionalization of these narratives, discourse contributes to the naturalization of de facto statehood and to the consolidation of internal loyalty.

From a theoretical perspective, the study supports the need to integrate discourse analysis into research on de facto states, as an indispensable instrument for understanding the internal mechanisms of legitimation. From a methodological point of view, the research demonstrates the usefulness of qualitative approaches in investigating political phenomena characterized by legal ambiguity and symbolic competition.

In applied terms, it is recommended that future research pay greater attention to the interaction between internal and external discourse, as well as to their impact on the processes of negotiation and conflict resolution. Understanding the discursive mechanisms of legitimation can contribute to formulating more effective policies for managing frozen conflicts and promoting regional stability.

4. References

Bakhturidze, Z. Z., & Vasilyeva, N. A. (2020). Unrecognized states of the post-Soviet space: Problems and prospects. *Problemy Postsovetskogo Prostranstva/ The Issue of the Post-Soviet Space*, 7(1), 29–41.

Blåkkisrud, H., & Kolstø, P. (2011). From secessionist conflict toward a functioning state: Processes of state- and nation-building in Transnistria. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 27(2), 178–210.

Constitution of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.vspmr.org/legislation/laws/zakonodateljnie-akti-pridnestrovskoy-moldavskoy-respubliki-v-sfere-konstitutsionnogo-stroya-osnov-pravoporyadka-a-takje-deyateljnosti-organov-gosudarstve

Cornea, S. (2018). The territorial dimension of local public power in the Republic of Moldova: Possible solutions to mitigate the effects of territorial fragmentation. *Perspectivele şi Problemele Integrării în Spațiul European al Cercetării şi Educației/ Prospects and Challenges of Integration into the European Research and Education Area*, 1, 7–16.

Dembińska, M. (2023). Legitimizing the separatist cause: Nation-building in the Eurasian de facto states. *Nationalities Papers*, 51(1), 80–97.

Fartan, G., & Bouris, D. (2025). Performing the (contested) state: A critical discourse analysis of Transnistria's political elites. *The International Spectator*, 60(2), 93–113.

German, T., & Bayramov, A. (2019). The (re-)politicisation of international relations in the post-Soviet space. *East European Politics*, 35(2), 117–121.

Gurbanov, E. (2025). Political language and discourse: Western and Russian perspectives. *International Journal of Research and Review*, 12(8), 427–432.

Kolosov, V. (2022). Internal and external sovereignty of post-Soviet unrecognised states. *In Pathways to Peace and Security* (pp. 67–91).

Markedonov, S. (2021). Post-Soviet de facto states: Trajectories of their struggle for sovereignty. *World Economy and International Relations*, 65(12), 79–89.

Pegg, S. (1998). International society and the de facto state. Routledge.

Roper, S. D. (2004). From frozen conflict to frozen agreement: The unrecognized state of Transnistria. *Ethnopolitics*, 4(1), 49–72.

Yemelianova, G. (2015). Western academic discourse on the post-Soviet de facto state phenomenon. *Caucasus Survey*, 3(3), 219–238.