

# Cheque-Mates? Abkhazia's Quest for International Recognition

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## Abstract

Abkhazia's contested status is a source of geopolitical conflict between states and alliances. But how has the campaign to expand this unrecognised state's network of diplomatic contacts been conducted? Using a wealth of contemporary archival material made available by Wikileaks, combined with interviews with key players in the process, this article investigates efforts to secure recognition for Abkhazia in the post-Soviet space, Latin America and amongst the South Pacific microstates. Different regions presented particular challenges and produced variable outcomes, some of which are counter-intuitive. Despite Russia's pre-eminence in the former USSR and its impressive arsenal of inducements and threats, the Kremlin failed to secure a single recognition for Abkhazia from another post-Soviet UN member state, though not from want of asking. Distant Latin America, where internecine Caucasian conflicts mattered little but alliances with Russian and antipathy towards the US were strong, produced the early recognitions and some near misses. As veterans of the China-Taiwan dispute, the microstates of the South Pacific region included many veterans of earlier diplomatic tugs-of-war. With sovereignty for sale, recognitions had a price and could potentially be reversed if these miniature states were presented with a better offer. A final recognition provided by Syria was in large part payback for Russia saving Bashir Al-Assad's regime from oblivion. With some recognitions dependent on personalities or regimes rather than enduring inter-state solidarity and others influenced by pecuniary considerations, all are vulnerable.

**Key words:** Abkhazia, unrecognised states, de facto states, post-Soviet, Georgia, Wikileaks, Russia.

## Introduction

The absence of divorce in international relations, except by mutual consent, does not imply a world of happy couples. Where sovereignty is contested, conflict inevitably follows and may have implications for regional, if not global security. Collective non-recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea and ongoing debates focusing on independence for Scotland, Catalonia, and Kurdistan demonstrate the salience of debates regarding separatism and diplomatic recognition. But while it is an object of political and legal controversy and an integral part of global diplomacy, the process of how de facto states seek recognition has not garnered the level of scholarly interest one might expect. This is no doubt in part because these contested regions are viewed as transient aberrations and/or the pawns of more powerful patrons. Unrecognised states feature in broader debates on self-determination, secession, international law, and conflict resolution, but how these strategically important regions seek to exit their status of legal limbo is less frequently subjected to rigorous study. Only states can recognise states and the exercise of this prerogative has been intensely political.

Despite relatively inhospitable conditions – in terms of political neighbourhood, lack of widespread recognition, a legacy of war and, until recently, threats of military attack – Abkhazia has endured for almost three decades. Using this unrecognised state as a case study, we explore the challenges to securing recognition from UN member states, as well as the methods patrons like Russia use to promote their political projects. The Kremlin didn't subscribe to the Western-promoted narrative

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that what happened in Kosovo stayed in Kosovo. Just months after the Balkan republic acquired recognition from the US and most of the EU in 2008, the Russian Federation endowed Abkhazia with a similar diplomatic status. Within four years, Abkhazia had secured recognition from six UN member states but momentum then stalled and went into reverse. The number of recognitions declined to four before Syria's opening of diplomatic ties in 2018 revived interest but has failed to arrest the impression that a new wave of breakthroughs is unlikely.

Abkhazia is what is called an 'unrecognised' (King, 2001; Caspersen, 2012) or 'de facto' (Pegg, 1998; Bahcheli et al., 2004) state. A myriad of alternative terms have also been used to describe these kinds of territories including 'pseudo-states' (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin, 1998), 'states within states' (Kingston and Spears, 2004), 'para-states' (Baev, 1998), 'quasi-states' (Kølsto, 2006), 'phantom states' (Byman and King, 2012), 'separatist states' (Lynch, 2004), 'contested states' (Geldenhuys, 2009) and 'informal states' (Isachenko, 2012). The rich array of terms is in part due to the anomalous character of these regions but also because of the highly politicised character of the debate. Successive Georgian governments have traditionally preferred to describe Abkhazia as a 'breakaway region'. In recent years, the term 'occupation' has become increasingly popular in official Georgian discourse (Coppieters, 2018) both for domestic mobilisation and to further counter-recognition strategies by depicting the Abkhaz administration as a puppet regime.

Broers (2013) and Pegg (2018) have provided masterly surveys of the literature on de facto states, but these distillations have, unfortunately, been rare. Post-Soviet unrecognised states have been examined primarily in the realm of geopolitics, international relations or conflictology (Chervonnaya, 1994; Coppieters et al., 1998; King, 2001; Cornell, 2005; Wolff, 2011; Companjen and Polese, 2012; Kabachnik, 2012; Souleimanov, 2013; Shesterinina, 2014; Ó Beacháin and Coene, 2014; Broers 2015; Ambrosio, 2016). A small coterie of authors have investigated the foreign policies of unrecognised states generally (Owtram, 2011; Comai, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Berg and Vits, 2018) or of Abkhazia in particular (Frear, 2014; Hoch 2018). Research conducted on internal democratisation processes (Broers, 2005; Popescu, 2006; Caspersen, 2011; Kopeček et al., 2016) and consideration of whether non-recognition can serve as a catalyst for democratic transitions (Voller, 2015) has also broadened our understanding of de facto state dynamics.

The literature on Abkhazia has also increased progressively during recent years, including several significant general books (Hewitt, 1998, 2013; Trier et al., 2010; Górecki, 2013; Tekushev et al., 2013) as well as significant works on the origins and development of Soviet Abkhazia (Blauvelt, 2007, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Saparov, 2014). Nationalism and the nation-building processes within Abkhazia (Clogg, 2008; Trier et al., 2010; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2013) have been afforded extensive consideration. There have been some notable contributions to our understanding of the dynamics of Abkhazian domestic politics, including those that relate to state-building (Blakkisrud and Kolstø, 2011; Bakke et al., 2014, 2018), elections (Ó Beacháin, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017), trade (International Crisis Group, 2018), citizenship (Tabachnik, 2019), gender (Ó Beacháin Stefańczak and Connolly, 2015), civil society (Hoch et al., 2017) and ethnic minorities (Trier et al., 2010; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2013; Comai and Venturi, 2015). A ground-breaking collation of data on domestic political preferences within Abkhazia and other post-Soviet de facto states has also been published (O'Loughlin, Toal and Kolossoff 2011; Toal and O'Loughlin 2013, 2017).

The longer these unrecognised states endure, the more pertinent becomes the question of how best to engage with them (Ker-Lindsay, 2018; Caspersen, 2018; de Waal, 2018), particularly by the EU and the OSCE (Popescu, 2012; Ó Beacháin, 2013; Axonova and Gawrich, 2018). Increasingly, their struggles to achieve international recognition have been considered (Berg and Toomla, 2009; Caspersen, 2009; Kosienkowski, 2013; Visoka, 2018a). There have been some comprehensive works on how and why UN member states decide to recognise putative peers (Fabry, 2010; Coggins, 2014), particularly following a large club of Western states and their affiliates established diplomatic relations with Kosovo in 2008 (Caspersen, 2015; Ó Beacháin et al. 2016; Newman and Visoka, 2016; Visoka, 2018a; Visoka, 2018b). The counter-recognition of contested states has also been afforded detailed treatment (Ker-Lindsay, 2012, 2015, 2018).

1 Jackson (1993) uses the term 'quasi states' to describe ineffectual recognised states.

Despite the wealth of information that Wikileaks has made available, this unique archive is relatively under-utilised by academics (Hunt, 2019). In North America, this is partially due to self-censorship following threats of legal consequences by US government officials (O'Loughlin, 2016). Scott Pegg and Eiki Berg have used Wikileaks to measure levels of engagement between four unrecognised states, including the two post-Soviet examples of Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, with the US and other major powers (Pegg and Berg, 2016; Berg and Pegg, 2016). This has been done by producing a data set comprising of 448 leaked US diplomatic cables dating from 2003 to 2010. The selection is confined to those cables in which the case studies' names appear so as to produce a quantitative analysis based on keywords determining the extent and character (neutral, hostile, supportive) of US interaction with de facto states.

In this article, we also exploit the contemporary archival material made available by Wikileaks but for different objectives and employing qualitative methodology. We seek here to investigate and illuminate efforts to secure recognition for Abkhazia.<sup>2</sup> To do this, we utilise all available Wikileaks cables (not just those with 'Abkhazia' in the title) to analyse efforts to secure recognition from UN member states. The cables are of most use when investigating the counter-recognition campaign sponsored primarily by the US and the EU in support of Georgia's internationally recognised borders, which are the same as those of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1991,<sup>3</sup> and which include Abkhazia.

Wikileaks provides a revelatory archive of documents long before it would have (if ever) been declassified and a first-hand account from the perspective of US diplomats throughout the world. However, while offering fascinating data regarding the geopolitics of the recognition process, it lacks intimacy with the key Abkhaz players, with whom US representatives very rarely engage. To compensate for this deficit, this article also utilises original interviews with Abkhazian ministers for foreign affairs who played an integral role in the campaign to secure recognition between 2004 and 2016. By using the wealth of archival material produced by Wikileaks, combined with original interviews conducted with key actors, we plan to shed light on Abkhazia's recognition quest and highlight the role that power politics played in determining varying outcomes.

We pay particular attention to efforts to secure recognition for Abkhazia in the post-Soviet region, Latin America and amongst the South Pacific microstates. Our investigation demonstrates that different regions presented particular challenges and produced variable results, some of which are counter-intuitive. Despite Russia's pre-eminence in the former USSR and the impressive arsenal of inducements and threats at its disposal, the Kremlin failed to secure a single recognition for Abkhazia from another post-Soviet UN member state though not from want of asking. Distant Latin America, where internecine Caucasian conflicts mattered little but alliances with Russian and antipathy towards the US were strong, produced the early recognitions and some near misses. As veterans of the China-Taiwan dispute, the microstates of the South Pacific region included many veterans of earlier diplomatic tugs-of-war. With sovereignty for sale, recognitions had a price and could potentially be reversed if these miniature states were presented with a better offer. A final recognition provided by Syria was in large part payback for Russia saving Bashir Al-Assad's regime from oblivion. With some recognitions dependent on personalities or regimes rather than enduring inter-state solidarity and others influenced by pecuniary considerations, all are vulnerable. As this article highlights, Abkhazia's status as a partially recognised state is less the result of pursuing a particular foreign policy and much more the product of international events, such as the recognition of Kosovo, that the Abkhaz were unable to control or direct. The number of recognitions would have been significantly greater had it not been for US and EU exertions

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2 We avoid coupling Abkhazia with South Ossetia, as is frequently done. This is because, while possessing many attributes of a de facto state, South Ossetia, in part because of its location and miniscule population, is more internationally isolated and integrated into Russia (de Waal, 2018, p. 10). Moreover, unlike the majority in Abkhazia, the South Ossetian leadership has no aspiration to become an internationally recognised independent state but, rather, seeks to unite with North Ossetia in the Russian Federation (O'Loughlin et al. 2011, 2014; O'Loughlin and Toal 2014; Toal and O'Loughlin 2017). However, South Ossetia is referred to throughout this article by virtue of the Kremlin's dual campaign, resulting in recognitions being usually afforded to Abkhazia and South Ossetia simultaneously.

3 The boundaries of the Georgian SSR alternated throughout the Soviet period. The borders it inherited when the USSR collapsed had been in continual existence for little more than three decades.

on Tbilisi's behalf. Ultimately, as this research illuminates, recognition depends less on a state's relations with Georgia or Abkhazia than with Russia and the West.

## Abkhazia's distinctive features

The Abkhaz are indigenous to the Caucasus and autochthons of Abkhazia. According to the most recent census (2011), little more than 240,000 people live in the Black Sea republic. There is also a large diaspora in Turkey, mostly decedents of those expelled by the Russian Empire in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the collapse of the Romanov dynasty in 1917, Abkhazia was incorporated into, and granted autonomy within, the newly-established Democratic Republic of Georgia, but in February 1921, both Georgia and Abkhazia were made Soviet Socialist Republics within the USSR. Abkhazia's status was repeatedly diluted, until in 1931 it was reduced to an autonomous republic within Georgia. During the last century, Russification has reduced the number of native speakers of Abkhaz, an ancient tongue unrelated to Georgian that belongs to the Western Caucasian branch of Abaza-Circassian languages.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz have tried with varying degrees of success to deliver basic services for their citizenry. Despite enjoying ample agricultural resources and tourism, Abkhazia relies heavily on subsidies from Russia. This dependence is symbolised by the use of the Russian rouble as the currency of Abkhazia and lack of recognition has inhibited foreign trade and interaction with other states.

War has forged Abkhazia, and despite attempts at reconstruction the legacy of conflict remains. It has also been the site of large-scale population displacement. Abkhazia's population today is less than half of what it was in 1989, mainly as the result of the 1992-1993 war, which forced about 200,000 Georgians to permanently flee the territory. Abkhazia remains heterogeneous; the Abkhaz constitute at most half of the population and co-exist with large minorities of Armenians and Georgians and smaller communities of Russians and Greeks. Society is highly militarised: Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia, and standing army numbers are exceptionally high given the diminutive population.

Abkhazia operates a presidential system, a choice influenced by its Soviet heritage, regional norms and the exigencies of war during which centralisation of power was considered essential. Initially, presidential incumbents faced little domestic opposition as those fearing renewed conflict placed a high premium on national unity. Since 2004, Abkhazia has proven capable of holding competitive and unpredictable elections in which real opposition candidates participate and enjoy prospects of success (Ó Beacháin, 2012, 2015, 2017). There has frequently been a close alignment between electoral politics and nation-building. Within political structures, the under-representation of non-Abkhaz ethnicities remains a key feature of domestic politics (Ó Beacháin, 2016).

Like other post-Soviet states, both recognised and unrecognised, Abkhazia has based its administrative bureaucracy largely on pre-existing communist-era structures. However, given the lack of a corresponding institution during Soviet times, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) had to be built from scratch. Lack of recognition created additional challenges, as did building a state in the immediate aftermath of a war that aroused little international interest, much less active aid and sympathy. The MFA's two main priorities are strengthening the strategic partnership with Russia and securing international recognition for the state.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The MFAs also play a role in providing consular services, issuing visas, coordinating the work of embassies and representative offices, and in general promoting the country abroad. It also seeks to play a role in enhancing trade and fostering favourable conditions for foreign investment and socio-economic development. See Comai (2018a, pp. 186-224)

## Russia's Role

Abkhazia's relationship with Russia eclipses all others. After supporting a crippling international embargo of Abkhazia during the 1990s, Kremlin policy shifted to open and direct support under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, which has provided pensions and passports for most Abkhazians (Gagulia, 2009). The decision by Western powers to push for the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state prompted the Kremlin to question why the right to self-determination should not be extended to what it maintained were similar cases in the post-Soviet space. 'Why can Albanians in Kosovo have independence but South Ossetia and Abkhazia can't', Putin asked in 2006, before adding rhetorically, 'what's the difference?' (Geldenhuys, 2009, p. 74). The brief but intense conflagration during August 2008, which primarily involved Russian and Georgian forces, provided the Kremlin with a pretext to recognise, on 26 August, Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. It borrowed heavily from the vocabulary and rationale employed by Western powers when intervening in the Balkans to support Kosovar claims against Serbia. Thus, Moscow accused the Georgian government of genocide in South Ossetia, prompting humanitarian intervention by Russian forces (Medvedev, 2008).

Formal recognition has facilitated an unprecedented level of support. Economically Russia is responsible for most of Abkhazia's trade and subsidises about half of Abkhazia's annual budget (Comai, 2018a, p. 188). In common with other very small states, in particular post-colonial ones, Abkhazia sends students and personnel for training in the structures of their patron state. Maintaining cooperation with Russia is, therefore, a vital priority although many in Abkhazia fear Moscow's embrace could become suffocating. It was a dilemma captured in an aphorism that did the rounds in Abkhazia following the 2008 war: 'we used to be independent but now we have recognition'.<sup>5</sup>

Once Russia established diplomatic ties with Abkhazia, the Kremlin embarked on a campaign to secure additional recognitions. Initially at least, Abkhazia enthusiastically threw itself into the fight for recognition, utilising Russian resources when available, particularly in Latin America.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 conflagration, the US tried unsuccessfully to mobilise the United Nations to censure Russia. For example, attempts to urge Vietnam and Burkina Faso, as recently elected non-permanent members of the Security Council, to 'publicly and forcefully condemn' Russia's recognition of Abkhazia, were rebuffed. Vietnam blamed Georgian President Saakashvili's decision to invade South Ossetia for the crisis and, further, maintained that the Kremlin's decision was 'a direct consequence of the US-led movement to recognise Kosovo, which Vietnam had opposed' (Hanoi Embassy, 2008). Burkina Faso refused to get involved in 'a new Cold War' between the US and Russia, and claimed that a public condemnation from its representatives would 'not change anything on the ground' (Ouagadougou Embassy, 2008).

In countries that had few views of their own on the issue, such as the majority of African states, the US and EU played a vital role in shaping it. In Kenya for example, the US embassy found their interlocutor 'not overly familiar with the dynamics of the recognition issue' but knew enough to ask 'how the situation was different from Kosovo'. The US official left the meeting with the impression that his counterpart 'seemed satisfied with the explanation ... that Kosovo is a special case' (Nairobi Embassy, 2009). These countries – what might be called 'the silent majority' or, more accurately, 'the indifferent centre' – could not be induced to recognise Abkhazia or to condemn Russian recognition of it.

## Latin America

To the surprise of many, it was not the post-Soviet space but, rather, Latin America that emerged as the key region in the struggle for early recognitions of Abkhazia, following Russia's lead. On closer inspection, however, there were many reasons why this continent emerged as a battleground.

<sup>5</sup> As communicated to the author.

Soviet and US interests had clashed here during the Cold War. The USSR believed that Latin America provided fertile soil for communism, and the enthronement of the Castro regime in Cuba provided a vivid demonstration of the potential risks to US interests in the region. Successive US administrations tried to suppress popular socialist movements in the region through support for right wing dictatorships and/or guerrilla movements. A diluted form of geopolitical competition continued after the Cold War subsided. The region contained several left-wing regimes that frequently combined populism with anti-US rhetoric and warm relations with the Kremlin. In the decade preceding Russia's recognition of Abkhazia, left-wing candidates won presidential elections in Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Honduras, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Paraguay.

From the Abkhaz perspective, opportunities for diplomatic breakthroughs were enhanced by the fact that as a faraway region that knew little of inter-ethnic disputes in the South Caucasus and cared less, it had few preconceived ideas about the conflicts and might be more open to persuasion. The Georgian government had virtually no diplomatic presence in the region. The Abkhaz also stressed that as the Montevideo Convention (1933) had been signed in Uruguay the region had a particular attachment to its provisions, which codified the declarative theory of statehood.

### Nicaragua and Venezuela

On 5 September 2008, the Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and acting foreign minister Manuel Coronel Kautz signed Decrees 46 and 47, extending full diplomatic recognition to its 'sister' republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, welcoming them into the 'community of independent nations of the world'. Nicaraguan radio reported that other Latin American nations had praised Ortega's leadership on this issue and that he had received calls from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Cuba's Raul Castro congratulating the move. There were murmurs of discontent from the opposition with the Constitutional Liberal Party (CLC), which had taken a quarter of the vote in the previous parliamentary election. The CLC lamented Nicaragua's 'continued alienation' from potentially useful states and the establishing of alliances with 'these countries protected by Russia' with whom Nicaragua had 'nothing to gain'. (Managua Embassy, 2008a)

Just over a year later, on 10 September 2009, Nicaraguan foreign minister Samuel Santos and Abkhazian deputy foreign minister Maxim Gvinjia signed agreements to establish formal diplomatic relations between their two countries. The timing was probably not coincidental, given that on the very same day Venezuela officially recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia. During his meeting with Gvinjia President Ortega reiterated his support for Abkhazian independence and invited President Bagapsh to visit Nicaragua (Managua Embassy, 2009).

According to the US embassy in Managua's internal records, Nicaragua's recognition of Abkhazia had 'everything to do with strengthening Ortega's relationship with Russia'. It noted that Ortega regularly gave speeches that 'fondly recall the Cold War Era and Moscow's support of the Nicaraguan Revolution' and that he was 'again actively courting the Kremlin'. The US Government speculated that Ortega believed the recognitions to be a 'low-cost' way of generating increased Russian military and economic assistance, offsetting the U.S. and European Union aid withdrawn following criticism of Nicaragua's local elections in November 2008. It believed Ortega sought to 'recreate the bipolar conflict and clientelism that once existed between Russia and the West in Central America' and was, therefore, happy to rekindle Cold War enmities (Managua Embassy, 2009).

The US informed Nicaragua that its decision to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia 'would cause all aspects of our relationship to be reviewed' as 'the territorial integrity of another nation allied to the U.S. and regional security were at stake' (Managua Embassy, 2008b). Maintaining that their decision had been motivated by a desire to encourage peace and in response to pleas from Abkhazia and South Ossetia following Georgian aggression, the Nicaraguan government noted that it had 'warned the U.S. when it recognized Kosovo that it had "opened Pandora's Box" and was now paying the consequences'. When the US countered by highlighting Nicaragua's refusal to recognise Kosovo, Nicaragua's representative replied that Kosovo should have remained part of



Yugoslavia but South Ossetia and Abkhazia were different 'for ethnic, historical and geographic reasons' (Managua Embassy, 2008b). The US ambassador communicated with peers representing other Western states in Nicaragua to better coordinate a response and to determine how other embassies would raise the matter with Managua.

Abkhazia's third recognition was secured on 10 September 2009, when Venezuela announced the opening of diplomatic relations with the two Caucasian republics. The timing and context – announced by President Hugo Chávez without prior fanfare following a meeting with his Russian counterpart – illustrated the core dynamics of this diplomatic initiative. Having made the recognitions announcement in Moscow, rather than in Sukhum/i, Chávez didn't bother to travel south to converse with his newly found allies in the Caucasus. Rather, he returned to Venezuela, where he revealed that he had secured a \$2.2 billion loan from the Kremlin to buy Russian arms. It appeared to most observers that the recognitions had been included as part of a larger package deal. While officially gracious, the recognition recipients were underwhelmed and there was little sense of popular celebration at what should have been a momentous occasion.<sup>6</sup>

### The ones that got away

The Abkhaz entertained hopes of further recognitions in Latin America. During spring 2009, an Abkhaz delegation led by deputy foreign minister Maxim Gvinjia embarked on a tour across Latin America, visiting Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador. Some of this work was in preparation for the visit of Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh in July. The US embassy in Tbilisi reported that Georgia's political leaders were 'visibly upset' by Venezuela's actions and warned that Russia's campaign could lead to multiple recognitions by the end of the year (Tbilisi Embassy, 2009a). Senior Georgian officials toured Latin American capitals in November 2009 to gauge the likelihood of additional recognitions. Though Russia had been lobbying in the region, the Georgians encountered more support than they had expected, which they attributed to the assistance of US officials (Tbilisi Embassy, 2009b; Tbilisi Embassy 2009c). At the UN and around the globe, Georgian diplomats embarked on a sustained campaign – aided by the EU and US – to discourage countries from recognising Abkhazia. Spain proved a particularly useful ally in applying pressure on Latin American states not to follow Nicaragua's lead.

### Ecuador and Bolivia

The greatest hopes were placed on Ecuador and Bolivia, both of which had left-wing presidents and adversarial relations with the US. In Ecuador, President Rafael Correa had come to power in Ecuador despite active US attempts to undermine his campaign (Quito Embassy, 2006). Since then, the Ecuadorian Government repeatedly accused the US of interfering in its internal affairs. In March 2009, it expelled US official Mark Sullivan, accused of being the CIA station chief in Quito, followed two years later by the US ambassador Heather Hodges. Within weeks of Gvinjia's boast that Ecuador and Bolivia were on the verge of recognising Abkhazia, Hillary Clinton was in Quito trying to repair relations. A chance encounter in December 2009 between the US embassy's political officer and Maxim Gvinjia in Quito prompted US embassy to renew US approaches to the Ecuadorian Government on the subject of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Quito Embassy, 2010). Following an attempted coup d'état in 2010, the Ecuadorian foreign minister Ricardo Patiño claimed that he would not be surprised if US-based 'power groups' in the State Department and CIA were behind it (Noticias24 / AFP, 2010).

Washington adopted a combative approach to the Bolivian government led by the Movement for Socialism under President Evo Morales. During their initial meeting in 2006, the US ambassador reminded the newly elected head of state of the many ways Bolivia depended on the US for assistance, not least through international financial institutions. 'When you think of the IDB [International Development Bank], you should think of the U.S.,' the Ambassador said, before adding, 'This is not blackmail, it is simple reality' (La Paz Embassy, 2006). A menu of punitive options

<sup>6</sup> Based on author's observations and discussions while in the Abkhaz capital, Sukhum/i, when Venezuela recognised Abkhazia in September 2009.

was quickly drawn up to apply financial pressure to ‘discourage bad behaviour and policy’. Within weeks of Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia, the Bolivian government expelled the US ambassador, alleging that he had been inciting the political opposition. Six months later, President Evo Morales ordered the U.S. Embassy’s second secretary to leave the country, alleging he was conspiring with opposition groups.

The military overthrow of the left-wing Honduran president Manuel Zelaya on 28 June 2009 unsettled many of his presidential peers throughout Latin America, not least because it was suspected that the US supported his ouster. Regional opposition bases in Bolivia, some of which entertained separatist agendas, were provided with millions of dollars to provide, in the words of the US embassy, a ‘counter-balance to the central government’ (La Paz Embassy, 2007). This support for regionally based opposition escalated into violent conflict in September 2008, when separatists in Bolivia’s wealthier eastern lowlands challenged the government.

Despite the risk of incurring the wrath of the US and EU, Ecuador and Bolivia appeared poised to recognise Abkhazia. The Abkhaz MFA made what seems in retrospect an important tactical error by announcing to journalists at the beginning of April that they were ‘waiting for Bolivia and Ecuador to recognize the independence of Abkhazia soon’. Unlike previous recognitions, which were sprung by surprise, the prospect of imminent but as yet unannounced recognitions provided the US with enough time to apply maximum pressure to secure a reversal. As Viacheslav Chirikba, who would succeed Gvinjia as Abkhazian foreign minister, later recalled ‘the recognitions of the republic were thwarted several times, because they [the MFA] declared it too early’ (Chirikba, 2018).

### The Dominican Republic

The Abkhaz persisted and seemed to be on the verge of a major diplomatic breakthrough with the Dominican Republic. In response to Georgian demarches, on at least three occasions in April-May 2011 the US government warned its counterpart in Santo Domingo against recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Chirikba, 2019; Clinton Emails 2011). Recognition appeared imminent as an official government delegation headed by the Dominican Republic’s deputy prime minister paid an official visit to Abkhazia on 12-13 May. According to Abkhazia’s foreign minister, Maxim Gvinjia, the US Government summoned President Fernández to New York, ostensibly for a conference, and sent a private plane for that purpose.<sup>7</sup> Gvinjia considered the conference to be a pretext for a dressing down. It certainly resulted in a sudden and decisive move away from recognising Abkhazia. ‘I do not know what they did to him, but after that he was even afraid to answer my e-mails’ (Gvinjia, 2017, 2019).

While the Abkhaz embarked on several intensive campaigns to solicit recognitions, they acknowledge that these efforts were stymied by the US and EU diplomatic counter offensives. Regarding one prospective recognition, the Abkhazian foreign minister recalls:

*The foreign minister - the prime minister later came - sat in the office. [We settled that] tomorrow we sign an agreement on the establishment of diplomatic relations and recognition, in general. I am only leaving from this palace when the US ambassador calls in. And there are shouts, yelling. I come the next day, I already know what has happened. Sorry, they say, the ambassador was here, and Hillary Clinton called, screamed, and shouted expletives. And they said that if we recognize Abkhazia, the United States will close all its programmes: [they said] ‘We will leave your country, we will stop financing you, we will break off all relations with you altogether.’” (Gvinjia, 2017)*

Ultimately, governments such as Ecuador, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic had to prioritise on which grounds to confront the US and, despite much cajoling, not least by Russia, decided that recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia was not worth the risk of rupturing relations with the West.

<sup>7</sup> Details of the conference and President Fernandez’s itinerary can be found at Diariolibre (2011)



Maxim Gvinjia had now embarked on several intensive campaigns but failed to secure additional recognitions and acknowledged that his efforts had been stymied by the US and EU diplomatic counter offensives:

*"I attracted so many states already; it's only because of the United States that I cannot advance further, they block me wherever I go. If it wasn't for the United States and the European Union, their position, their influence [my efforts would be much more successful]. If they would give me a fair game - I can play a fair game - I could get many more countries to recognise us."*  
(Gvinjia, 2011)

With recognition efforts in Latin America reaching a dead-end, the diplomatic offensive turned to other regions.

## The Post-Soviet Region

If the US was not having much success awakening indignation from a largely indifferent international community, Russia was having difficulty mustering support from its closest allies. Two days after Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Dushanbe provided the perfect platform for Russia to garner support for its new diplomatic departure. As an alliance of regional dictators, composed of four post-Soviet Central Asian States (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), China and Russia itself, the Kremlin might have expected to get a good hearing for its case to recognise Abkhazia. However despite being Russian allies, the SCO members were unlikely to be instinctive supporters of Abkhazian independence. With their own real (or potential) secessionist ethnic minorities, they had little incentive to recognise separatists in post-Soviet states. China, in particular, was obsessed with secessionism, with Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang to contend with. Within Central Asia too, Stalinist cartography had left a legacy of ethnic minorities on the 'wrong' side of borders.<sup>8</sup>

Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon later confided to US under secretary William Burns that the SCO summit had been 'tough' due to Russian pressure to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia (US State Department, 2009). Like many others, Rahmon blamed Saakashvili's impatience and poor judgement for the debacle. He feared that poor relations between Moscow and Washington would put his country in a difficult position, if not lead to a 'world catastrophe' (US State Department, 2009). Ultimately, the SCO expressed support for Russia's role in the conflict but stopped short of recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Dushanbe Embassy, 2008a). The summit ended with a bland communiqué expressing 'deep concern' and stressing the importance of resolving conflict through negotiation, while the media were dismissed without being allowed to ask questions. On 29 August, President Medvedev embarked on an official visit to Tajikistan, but his bilateral meetings with President Rahmon failed again to deliver recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, despite Russia's promise to build three hydroelectric stations (Dushanbe Embassy, 2008e). By March 2009, the US embassy in Dushanbe reported that Tajikistan, considered the SCO member most susceptible to Kremlin pressure, would likely continue its delicate balancing act. It would neither criticise Russian actions nor recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the embassy concluded that 'it is not useful to pursue this matter further' given the country's dependence on 'the former colonial power' (Dushanbe Embassy, 2009).

When it came to the Kremlin's campaign to secure recognitions for Abkhazia and Georgian fears of a 'cascade of recognitions', Belarus was considered the key battleground state (Tbilisi Embassy, 2009a). If left simply to decide between competing entreaties from Tbilisi and Moscow, Belarus would obviously defer to the latter. Countervailing pressure from the US and, more importantly, the EU would provide decisive leverage to shape Minsk's judgement on how best its national

<sup>8</sup> In advance of the summit, one top Tajik official privately acknowledged that Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had put his country in 'a difficult position', but it was unlikely Dushanbe would take a public stand on the issue, and were they to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia 'we would have to recognise Kosovo too' (Dushanbe Embassy, 2008b). See also Dushanbe Embassy 2008c; Dushanbe Embassy 2008d.

interests could be served. During a face to face meeting on 2 September 2008, Lithuanian prime minister Gediminas Kirkilas asked his Belarusian counterpart Sergei Sidorsky to 'think twice' about recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Sidorsky responded that Russia was exerting 'huge pressure' on the Belarusian Government to do so, threatening to treble the price of natural gas in 2009 from approximately \$140 per 1,000 cubic meters to over \$400. By linking the price of natural gas to the recognition of Abkhazia, the Kremlin sought to apply pressure where it could be most effective. Even a decision by Gazprom to postpone a scheduled price increase to \$200 in January would save Belarus billions of euro in 2009 alone. A similar conversation took place that day between the Lithuanian and Belarusian foreign ministers, with the latter communicating that Russia had given Minsk until 9 September to make a decision (Vilnius Embassy, 2008a).

Throughout these vital months, the government in Tbilisi fretted over the imminent Belarusian recognition. The Georgian Ambassador to Belarus maintained that 'no combination of US and EU enticements ... can compare with potential carrots (or sticks) from Moscow' (Vilnius Embassy, 2008b). He noted too with concern that not a single Belarusian official had signed the Georgian book of condolences produced in the immediate aftermath of the conflagration. While the US stressed to Minsk that recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia would have a 'direct, negative effect' on relations with the US, it was tempered by the realisation that years of mutual hostility had reduced that bilateral relationship to very little.

Certainly, Lukashenko's public statements gave Tbilisi every reason to worry. The Belarusian leader ardently defended Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, maintaining that the Kremlin had 'no other moral choice' except to support their 'appeal to recognize their rights to self-determination' (Voice of America, 2009). Lukashenko publicly called for the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which, along with Russia and Belarus, included Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to devise a joint position on the conflict. However, as was the case with the SCO summit, at the critical CSTO meeting on 5 September 2008 in Moscow, the Kremlin received 'understanding' and 'support' for its actions in the Caucasus but no additional recognitions of Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

In its private assessment, the US Government noted the Belarusian regime's 'talents for claiming action but not actually carrying through' were being tested to the full extent and that 'despite ridiculously elaborate praise of Russian aggression' Minsk had managed to avoid Moscow's calls to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Vilnius Embassy, 2008b). The Belarusian President obfuscated and played for time. After loyally pushing discussion on recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia at the inconclusive CSTO summit, Lukashenko kicked into touch by declaring that the new Belarusian parliament due to be elected on 28 September could take up the issue. This was despite the fact that senior government sources in Minsk readily conceded privately that a simple instruction from Lukashenko was all that was required to effect recognition (Vilnius Embassy, 2008b). At this time, observers believed recognition from Belarus to be 'only a question of time, with the regime seeing what it can get in return' (Vilnius Embassy, 2008b).

Coming as it did a full year after the 2008 war and the Kremlin's response, Venezuelan recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia renewed Georgian fears that Belarus would quickly follow suit, resulting in an unstoppable domino effect. Until now, not a single post-Soviet state had caved in to Kremlin pressure on the issue, but a recognition from Minsk at this critical juncture might have proven to be a vital turning point. During a meeting on 16 September 2009 with diplomatic representatives from Germany, France, the UK and the US, Georgian foreign minister Grigol Vashadze said that his missions abroad had confirmed that Belarus was again under 'great pressure' from Russia to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia and that Lukashenko had announced that the Belarusian Parliament would consider recognition when it convened on 2 October (Tbilisi Embassy, 2009a). Vashadze feared that a decision by Belarus to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia 'could turn the tide in Europe', resulting in all former Soviet republics – with the exception of Ukraine, Moldova and Azerbaijan, which had their own secessionist regions – recognising the territories (Tbilisi Embassy, 2009a).

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili harboured similar anxieties. While convinced that Lukashenko 'hate[d] Vladimir Putin', evidenced by his refusal to join the Kremlin in banning Georgian imports in 2006, he told US officials that the Belarusian leader was under huge economic pressure from Russia to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia and could not hold out much longer (Tbilisi Embassy, 2009b). Should Minsk acquiesce, Saakashvili warned, Georgia would be unable to work with Belarus within the framework of the EU's new Eastern Partnership Initiative, in which Tbilisi had invested much hope and energy (Tbilisi Embassy, 2009b).<sup>9</sup> The Georgians lamented that the Eastern Partnership's founding documents had failed to include a specific reference to the importance of territorial integrity (Tbilisi Embassy, 2009b).

The much-anticipated Belarusian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia never transpired, leading to recriminations between Moscow and Minsk. In August 2010, President Medvedev recalled that in the presence of CIS leaders the Belarusian president had 'solemnly pledged' to recognise Abkhazia 'in the shortest period of time' (Civil Georgia, 2010b). Lukashenko later attributed this volte-face to threats from the US and EU (Belarus had slightly more trade with the latter than with Russia) and the fact that Moscow had failed to offer any mitigating guarantee. In a frank admission of a meeting with the Russian president, Lukashenko recalled:

*"So with the long list of possible disasters, which could have embraced Belarus [if it recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia], I met with [President Medvedev] in Sochi and we discussed this problem, during which he was citing my solemn pledge [to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia]. I am not rejecting [making such pledge]. But I told him, 'There will be consequences [for Belarus]; are you ready Mr. President, dear friend, to share these consequences together with us? Are you ready to put your shoulder [to ours]?' I quote [Medvedev's response], 'Let's stop this horse-trading. This is one issue and that's another'. So I told him, 'Thanks, the issue is now closed, there is no continuation to this conversation.'"* (Civil Georgia, 2010c)

Lukashenko consistently made clear that for him the recognition issue was a matter, first and foremost, of Belarus's national interest and had little to do with the merits of the individual cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At a press conference on 2 October 2010, he told Russian journalists that considering Russian-Belarusian relations 'of course we should have recognised [South] Ossetia and Abkhazia; no matter what [Russia] is our ally. From this point of view, we should have done that. Frankly speaking, we were ready to do it' (Civil Georgia, 2010c).

Ultimately, it was the prospect of reduced trade with the EU that weighed most decisively on Lukashenko's calculations (Civil Georgia, 2009). Since 2010, there has been little evidence that recognition of Abkhazia has been under active consideration by the Belarusian government (Civil Georgia, 2010a). Dissuading Belarus proved a turning point at this critical juncture. Although there would be subsequent recognitions, as catalogued below, none had the clout of the early troika, some were reversed, and only Russia's recognition seems secure. Having reached dead ends in Latin America and the post-Soviet space, the Kremlin now turned its attention to the South Pacific, where multiple microstates struggling to survive were open to doing deals that might include recognition of faraway lands of which they knew little.

## Microstate diplomacy in the South Pacific

The South Pacific microstates are old hands at the recognition game. Taiwan had secured six valuable recognitions in the region – from the Solomon Islands, Palau, Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu – all of which were ripe for Russian inducements to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In these cases, recognition is bought rather than earned. It is not a question of states weighing up the merits of conflicting nation-state building projects or territorial claims but rather a question of each alliance trying to outbid the other. Many states, particularly the small,

<sup>9</sup> The Eastern Partnership, which targets Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, aims at upgrading engagement, including the prospect of association agreements, integration into the EU economy and easier travel to the EU.

vulnerable and developing, are open to financial stimuli, which are material and quantifiable, in return for the largely intangible exercise of recognising a small distant state with which it enjoys no contact. Propositions are attractive if the costs do not outweigh the benefits, and this is where interventions by the EU, the US, Australia and the (British) Commonwealth have been vital. In chequebook diplomacy, it's not simply a matter of who offers the most largesse, but also who can threaten the greatest repercussions. In the South Pacific seas, as with the largely disinterested states of Latin America and Africa, this battle has not been primarily fought between Georgia and Abkhazia but rather between their respective allies.

## Nauru

When the tiny South Pacific island of Nauru established diplomatic relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia on 15 December 2009, the logic might not have been immediately obvious to casual observers of international politics. With a territory of just 21 square kilometres and a population of 10,084, according to the island's 2011 census, Nauru is, after the unique outlier of the Vatican, the least populous state in the world. Separated from its nearest neighbour (Kiribati, another micro-state) by over 300 kilometres of empty ocean, Nauru is a country without a capital, a military, or a national currency. Bereft of political parties, alliances in the 18-member parliament are usually built around friends and family, from which they elect a President (Reilly and Gratschew, 2001, p. 698). Nauru only joined the United Nations in 1999, having achieved independence three decades earlier.

The timing of the Russian approach to Nauru was also important, as it coincided with a period of unprecedented economic vulnerability. For decades, a phosphate boom had delivered one of the highest per-capita GDPs in the world, but as reserves of this valuable commodity vanished, Nauru's long-term survival was in doubt and the island's leaders looked for other sources of revenue. The island developed a large internet based banking industry, facilitating more than 400 banks to benefit from its secret tax-free status. In 1998, for example, Moscow accused Nauru of accepting and electronically transferring an estimated \$70 billion from Russian organised crime (Pretes, 2002, p. 395). International pressure, including an American threat to deny Nauru's right to trade in USD, forced the island to desist from this lucrative and easy source of income, and by 2001 the Bank of Nauru had closed for want of cash. At this stage, 80% of the island's surface had been strip-mined and phosphate deposits virtually exhausted. Proposals to uproot Nauru's population and move it to another location proliferated. In 2001, it was deprived of full membership of the Commonwealth, which it had obtained only two years earlier, for being unable to pay its modest membership dues.<sup>10</sup> Four years later, Australian creditors seized Air Nauru's only plane.<sup>11</sup> Bereft of national resources, the island's elite fell back on the one thing they could sell – its sovereignty. Nauru promptly re-recognised Taiwan and, reportedly, as a reward Taipei helped Air Nauru purchase a second-hand Boeing 737. Clearly, this was a state suitable for Russian overtures and, in return for a purported \$50million, Nauru became the fourth UN member state to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The US embassy in Tbilisi privately noted that while Georgia's response to the Venezuelan and Nicaraguan recognitions had been 'manic', they adopted, outwardly at least, a more 'relaxed approach' to Nauru's declaration, a stance that the US encouraged (Tbilisi Embassy, 2009c). Despite the pecuniary and conditional character of the diplomatic relationship, Abkhazia and Nauru have kept up appearances.<sup>12</sup> In 2013, Nauru's foreign minister travelled to Abkhazia followed four years later, in November 2017, by President Baron Waqa, the first non-Russian head of state to visit. Such relationships are, however, entirely superficial in character. Emblematic of these diplomatic stunts have been the negotiation of visa-free treaties. Despite the attendant pomp and publicity that accompanies the signings, the likelihood that one of Nauru's 4000 adults would seek to visit Abkhazia for business or pleasure is low.

<sup>10</sup> It rejoined in 2011.

<sup>11</sup> At one stage, Air Nauru boasted 7 planes that flew to thirty destinations despite capacity being below 20% or even non-existent. See Westmoreland, 2009, pp. 151-152.

<sup>12</sup> See interviews with Nauru's speaker of parliament, Ludwig Scotty, who led the delegation, and Ben Van Der Sadne, adviser to Nauru's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Alagala, 2011).

## Vanuatu

Next to enter the diplomatic fray was Vanuatu, a cluster of islands in the southwest Pacific, over 2000 kilometres east of Australia. Vanuatu's multiple recognitions and ultimate de-recognition of Abkhazia (notably, no parallel recognition of South Ossetia was proffered) reflects how a severely fragmented domestic political scene has influenced this inconsistent foreign agenda (Hassall, 2007). Vanuatu first recognised Abkhazia on 23 May 2011, and a week later the fruits of diplomatic relations were evident when its prime minister issued a formal statement offering condolences on the passing of Abkhaz president Sergei Bagapsh. The first signs of the schizophrenic character that was to define Vanuatu's relationship with Abkhazia manifested itself just four days later when, in an interview with the *New York Times*, Vanuatu's UN ambassador denied that his country had recognised Abkhazia saying, '...as far as we are concerned, we are dealing with Georgia, not Abkhazia. It is defamation for our country [to suggest otherwise]' (Transparency International Vanuatu, 2011). This in turn triggered a response from Vanuatu's foreign minister Alfred Carlot the very next day, re-affirming Vanuatu's commitment to recognising Abkhazia. On 10 June, Carlot apologised for the 'miscommunication' between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Vanuatu's UN Representative in New York, but the matter did not rest there. Five days after this clarification, the prime minister's senior political advisor declared that no diplomatic relations with Abkhazia had been established. A change of prime minister on 17 June resulted in Vanuatu officially withdrawing recognition of Abkhazia, ostensibly to keep in line with the majority of the UN. When, however, Vanuatu's Supreme Court declared the election unconstitutional ten days later and reinstated Prime Minister Sato and foreign minister Carlot, Abkhazia was re-recognised on 7 October 2011.

In May 2013, Vanuatu withdrew their recognition of Abkhazia for the final time and signed an agreement with Georgia two months later. What might seem to the casual observer as regular diplomatic mood swings can in part be explained by the deep divisions within Vanuatu's politics. Some also saw these events as a rerun of Vanuatu's earlier tango with China and Taiwan. In November 2004, Vanuatu had recognised Taiwan in return for \$30 million in aid only to re-establish relations with China one month later after Vanuatu's prime minister lost power (Atkinson, 2010).<sup>13</sup>

## Tuvalu

The next recognition of Abkhazia also emanated from the South Pacific region, from the tiny Polynesian state of Tuvalu (Civil Georgia, 2011). A collection of eight atoll islands totalling a mere 26 square kilometres and inhabited by a population of 10,640 (2012 census), Tuvalu became a member of the United Nations in the year 2000. It is governed by a 12-seat parliament that selects a prime minister (the British monarch is Head of State). A government delegation headed by Prime Minister Willy Telavi visited Sukhum/i on 18 September 2011 and Tskhinval/i the following day, signing documents establishing diplomatic relations with the leaders of both republics.<sup>14</sup>

The Georgian government belatedly stirred and began to provide humanitarian assistance to Tuvalu, sending a shipment of medical equipment shortly before the recognitions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a futile gesture that failed to reverse the course of events. A source at the Georgian foreign ministry responded to the new recognition by saying that 'with all due respect to UN member states, I would like to point out that according to experts' predictions Tuvalu will soon be underwater', before adding with diplomatic understatement that the decision was 'most likely ... influenced by considerations of a quite pragmatic and mercantile nature' (Kommersant, 2011).

In September 2011, Georgian foreign minister Grigol Vashadze conducted the first tour of the South Pacific countries in the history of Georgian diplomacy. Ostensibly about strengthening bilateral relations, the trip was very much an expedition to prevent a new wave of recognitions by

<sup>13</sup> For background see Biddick, 1989. A similar situation occurred in 2008 when Taiwan lost \$30m trying to entice recognition from Papua New Guinea. See Rich, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> This author briefly met with Prime Minister Willy Telavi during his visit to Abkhazia as it coincided with early presidential elections called following death of Sergei Bagapsh. Telavi brought with him a solitary observer from Tuvalu to observe the election.

regional microstates. Vital to this effort would be the help of Australia and New Zealand. These countries were patrons to many small Oceanic states, and Vashadze lobbied both regional powers as part of his tour. As had been the case with Vanuatu, a change of government combined with external pressure and inducements prompted Tuvalu to rescind its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Civil Georgia, 2014). Telavi's administration was replaced in 2013 by one led by Enele Sopoaga, who had previously criticised the decision to recognise the Caucasian republics without consulting Tuvalu's parliament.

'It might be unfair to call Nauru and Tuvalu diplomatic prostitutes,' Oliver Bullough has noted, 'but they have tended to hook up with anyone who'll pay them' (Bullough, 2014). While it is easy to dismiss such political promiscuity, for these tiny South Pacific states investments in lieu of favours rendered are a matter of national survival. The battle for the votes and bank accounts of South Pacific nations continued apace throughout the 2010s with countries like Samoa, Kiribati, Palau and Fiji prime targets. Georgia now embarked on a frenzied scramble to prevent further Kremlin-inspired recognitions. During the four years following the 2008 war, Georgia established diplomatic relations with no less than fifty UN member states (Civil Georgia, 2012). Fiji is a case in point. Georgia only initiated diplomatic relations with Fiji in March 2010, and on October 2011 the tiny nation was honoured by a visit from Georgian foreign minister Grigol Vashadze. Suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum and from the Commonwealth because of the 2006 coup, Fiji's diplomatic isolation also made it a potential target for new friends, particularly those bearing gifts. The Georgians were understandably jittery in advance of Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Fiji on 1 February 2012, as part of a five-stop tour of the Asia-Pacific region, and publicly pleaded with Fiji to (in the words of their deputy foreign minister) 'resist the temptation' to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In an effort to fight temptation with temptation, by the end of the year Georgia had gifted the schools of Fiji with hundreds of computer netbooks along with numerous educational scholarships (Fijian Government, 2012)

While Georgia's chequebook is not as large or its pockets as deep as Russia's, Tbilisi's powerful allies provided vital inducements and deterrents, which determined the stances of many uncommitted UN member states. In particular, fear of losing US, EU and/or Australian aid influenced many a potential waverer. Through its Consolidation Appropriations Acts, the annual budgetary legislation sanctioning spending by various federal agencies, the US prohibits the provision of aid to those governments that have recognised the independence of, or established relations with, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>15</sup> There are a few potential loopholes, however. The Act stipulates that no funds can be made available to the central governments of errant states, but this leaves open the possibility of funding other agencies and institutions. Moreover, the Secretary of State can waive this restriction on assistance if s/he determines that 'to do so is in the national interest of the United States' (US Congress, 2018a).

The Act also directs the Secretary of the Treasury to instruct the US executive directors of each international financial institution to vote against any assistance, including by loan, credit, or guarantee, for any programme deemed to violate Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Sec 7070 (c) 3). The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, signed into law in August 2017, also makes several references to Abkhazia. In addition to imposing sanctions against Russia, it authorised the expenditure of \$250 million for the Countering Russian Influence Fund during the 2018-19 fiscal year. In acting thus, the US declares its adherence to the principle of *ex injuria jus non oritur* and supports the 'Stimson Doctrine', named after the former US Secretary of State, both eschewing recognition of territorial changes effected by force, which include 'the illegal invasions and occupations of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and Transnistria' (US Congress, 2018b).

15 In 2018, the Act authorised no less than \$105.3 million in aid for Georgia (US Congress, 2018a)



## Syria

On 29 May 2018, the Syrian government recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia and announced that it would be opening embassies in both states. Though ostensibly 'in gratitude for their assistance against terrorist aggression' in Syria, it was more accurately a token of appreciation for Russian help in keeping the Assad regime in power. Certainly, the carefully choreographed recognition bore all the hallmarks of Kremlin influence. Diplomatic relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia were established at exactly the same time, and both Caucasian republics published almost identical statements announcing the new departure. Abkhazia's links with Syria have been significant (Sukhum/i has encouraged hundreds of Syrian refugees of Abkhazian origin to resettle) but are ironically the result of Russia's deportation of the Abkhaz during the 19th century. Georgia responded to Syria's recognition by severing diplomatic relations with Damascus. Following years of hiatus, this gesture came at a time when the general view was that the Kremlin had stopped seeking recognitions for Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the practice had proven to be unflattering and expensive. It suggests that while the quest for recognitions has lost momentum it has not been abandoned altogether. According to Abkhazia's longstanding foreign minister Viacheslav Chirikba:

*"The Russian position was like this: we would welcome this recognition, but this should be the initiative of both sides. I met officially with the Syrian ambassador in Moscow in 2015,<sup>16</sup> and he promised that as soon as the war in Syria was over they would raise the level of our relations. Well, of course, Russia was a strong factor, but the Abkhaz side too was very active diplomatically. In general, Russia was readily supporting our efforts when asked by our side, providing logistics and helping diplomatically, in conformity with our mutual agreements."* (Chirikba, 2019)

Unlike the recognitions from very distant countries in Latin America and the South Pacific, with whom it is difficult to maintain any meaningful economic relationship, Syria is much closer, reachable by sea and air connections and, combined with the Caucasian diasporas, more suitable potentially for economic and cultural interaction (Chirikba, 2019).

## Conclusion

Abkhazia's contested status is a source of tension between Russia and the West, a fault line of world politics with echoes of Cold War rivalries. Russia is unquestionably Abkhazia's most important partner. The extreme asymmetry of this relationship, combined with Abkhazia's anomalous status, has fostered a very high level of dependence on Moscow's goodwill. This has extended to the quest to secure international recognition following the 2008 war. While Abkhazia's MFA ardently pushed its case for recognition, Moscow's clout has been decisive in securing breakthroughs.

The criteria for recognition are vague, contradictory, under-regulated, and decentralised to each individual state. Experience suggests that securing recognition is as much, if not more, a political rather than a legal process. While a legal framework provides general principles and an appearance of consistency, in practice much of international recognition practice has been *ad hoc*, reactive, *sui generis*, intensely politicised, and inconsistent. Subject to the vagaries of great power politics, the process in practice is frequently pragmatic, even hypocritical, rather than principled, and self-serving rather than altruistic.

Latin America provided the early advances with Nicaragua and Venezuela, through the personal interventions of President Daniel Ortega and Hugo Chavez respectively, affording speedy recognition but expected breakthroughs in Bolivia and Ecuador failed to materialise. Chirikba (2019) recalls that 'several Latin American countries expressed their interest in recognising Abkhazia' but due to 'prior announcements of their intentions, threats from the USA and EU followed', which stalled the process before completion. The US enjoys immense leverage in Latin America and was not averse to advertising it.

16 See Ria Novesti, 2015.

Remarkably, none of the recognitions came from within the post-Soviet space, where the Kremlin arguably has the most clout. Belarus proved to be a vital weathervane for determining the prevailing diplomatic winds. By recoiling from recognising Abkhazia at a critical juncture, it made it much less likely that the Kremlin would secure support from other post-Soviet allies.

Punching significantly above their miniscule diplomatic weight, the island nations of the South Pacific proved to be a key battleground. Having been willingly dragged into the diplomatic war between Russia and the West, the foreign policy of these microstates is essentially one of selling recognition in return for economic aid. The undeveloped nature of their economies combined with the enormous distance between the Caucasian republics and their fickle partners minimises the chances of meaningful engagement and greatly limits trading opportunities.

Despite the recent addition of Syria to its diplomatic network, Abkhazia's recognitions are vulnerable. Those provided by Nicaragua and Venezuela were very much the personal initiative of Daniel Ortega and Hugo Chávez. At the time of writing, both Nicaragua and Venezuela teeter on the brink of major civil conflict. It is unlikely that recognition of Abkhazia will long survive the end of these regimes. A tempting aid package for Nauru along with a change of government in Syria and the recognition of Abkhazia might well be reduced to a solitary endorsement from its reliable patron, Russia.

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