

What Vanuatu's Recognition of Abkhazia Might Mean

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This past weekend the small Pacific Island country of Vanuatu announced that it would recognize the independence of Abkhazia, the disputed territory on the Black Sea which is viewed as independent by Russia, Nauru, Vanuatu, Venezuela and Nicaragua, but is seen as part of Georgia by most of the rest of the world. Abkhazia, along with South Ossetia, another polity which has broken away from Georgia, was recognized as independent states by Russia following the Russia Georgia war of 2008, but have struggled to receive broader recognition since that time. Russia is the patron of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but has not been able to persuade many states to join them in recognizing the independence of these two places.

Vanuatu's decision to recognize Abkhazia is not entirely surprising. Abkhazia, with the support of its Russian patron, had been actively seeking recognition from many different countries in recent months. Georgia, for its part, was seeking commitments of non-recognition for Abkhazia and South Ossetia from these countries. Most of the countries which were in play were either small Latin American countries or small Pacific countries. Although Georgia seems to have been able to block Abkhazia's efforts in the former region, they have not been able to succeed with every country.

Recognition of Abkhazia by Vanuatu does not make Abkhazia a real country, but it may have an impact on this. As Vanuatu is too small and distant to have any direct bearing on Abkhazia's future, its decision to recognize Abkhazia is better understood as part of a larger story. The Abkhaz have sought to tell as story of a small state which has won its independence from a larger more powerful neighbor, slowly building relations, and winning recognition, from different countries around the world. Vanuatu's recognition clearly fits into this narrative.

Vanuatu's recognition of Abkhazia also fits into Georgia's very different narrative about Abkhazia. According to the Georgian view, supported by its European and particularly American patrons, Abkhazia is part of Georgia, currently occupied by Russia. Abkhaz independence is a sham as the country is recognized only by Russia and a few other small countries which Russia is able to influence, and by terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah. These two story lines are obviously not remotely compatible, but Vanuatu's decision fits into both reasonably well.

From the Abkhaz angle, Vanuatu is another country recognizing Abkhaz independence. While it is a small sparsely populated country, not unlike Nauru, it is still a country. The Abkhaz approach is to slowly win recognition from more countries because every one of these recognitions makes it harder to ever reunite Abkhazia with Georgia. Vanuatu may be almost irrelevant, but if a few more Pacific Island, Central American or Central African countries follow suit, the cumulative effect is

important. Ten or fifteen small countries put together are very relevant and makes it extremely difficult to undo Abkhazia's nascent aspirations to independence.

From the Georgian angle, Vanuatu is another country whose recognition of Abkhazia underscores the view that Abkhaz independence is a joke. Vanuatu has roughly a quarter of a million people, fewer than some neighborhoods in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, is located almost on the other side of the planet from Abkhazia and has virtually no interest or influence in the region. Rather than being another brick in the wall of Abkhaz independence, Vanuatu's recognition is further evidence of the incompetence of Abkhazia and their Russian patrons who must go so far afield to win recognition. The extent to which Russian money played a role in Vanuatu's decision, as it did in Nauru, is not yet clear, but if it is found that Russian money was an important factor, it will further strengthen the Georgian narrative.

On its own, Vanuatu's recognition does not mean much, because it allows both sides to confirm what they have been saying already. What happens next is far more important. If Vanuatu's recognition leads to a small boomlet of recognitions with, for example, three more countries recognizing Abkhazia in the next six months or so, then the Georgia-Abkhazia dynamic will have changed and Abkhazia's position will have changed as well. However, if there are no other recognitions this year, Vanuatu will begin to look more like Nauru and do little to demonstrate that Abkhaz aspirations for independence are serious.