

A Win for Tbilisi

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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If the Georgian government had scripted recent events in Abkhazia, and between Abkhazia and Vanuatu, it could not have gotten a better outcome than what has actually occurred. Vanuatu, a tiny Pacific Island state briefly recognized, or almost briefly recognized, Abkhazia in the beginning of June. Almost immediately after the announcement of the recognition there were rumors that the government of Vanuatu was back tracking as Vanuatu's Ambassador to the UN claimed to know nothing of the recognition. Georgia, of course, has continued to maintain that Abkhazia is part of Georgia. This view is supported by the U.S., the European Union and most of the world.

This week, less than a month after the initial announcement by the de facto Abkhaz government that Vanuatu was recognizing them, [Vanuatu officially withdrew their recognition](#), likely putting an end to the story. The reasons for the withdrawal of recognition are not clear, but are likely due either to a change of government in Vanuatu, pressure on Vanuatu from Georgia's allies, most notably the U.S., or the incompetence of the Abkhaz leadership.

Vanuatu's withdrawal of recognition is a huge victory for Georgia for several reasons. The first and most obvious reason is that it does not add another country to the paltry list of countries, currently including Russia, Nicaragua, Nauru and Venezuela, which recognize Abkhazia. Had Vanuatu recognized Abkhazia, despite its small size and relative obscurity, it still would have been something of a victory for Abkhazia. Second, Vanuatu's decision to not recognize Abkhazia raises the possibility that Georgia's allies are willing to be very active in supporting Georgia's position on Abkhazia. It is not known, but cannot be precluded, that following the recognition announcement the U.S. cajoled or threatened Vanuatu eventually leading that country's leaders to change their initial decision.

A third reason this is good for Georgia is that Abkhazia's mishandling of the situation shows the Abkhaz leadership to be amateurish, even bumbling. Countries, or in the case of Abkhazia, aspiring countries, that make announcements that they have won recognition from another country only to have the recognizing country challenge that assertion are hard to take seriously. This kind of behavior undermines the Abkhaz claim that it is ready for statehood. It is not clear whether Vanuatu recognized Abkhazia and changed its mind, or never recognized Abkhazia at all, but the events themselves matter less than the perception. Had the recognition been real, opponents of Abkhazia would assert that Abkhazia can only win recognition from tiny irrelevant countries like Vanuatu and Nauru. Now opponents of Abkhaz independence can assert that Abkhazia can't even get it right when it seeks recognition from small and irrelevant countries. Lastly, the withdrawal of recognition suggests that recognition may not move only in one direction. If Vanuatu changed its mind, one might ask, isn't it possible that Nauru, or

some other future small country which might decide to recognize Abkhazia, could cancel that recognition if given the right incentives?

This episode regarding Vanuatu puts some immediate pressure on Abkhazia to get recognition from somewhere to demonstrate that Abkhaz aspirations for independence are still moving forward. If Abkhazia fails to do this, the mishandling of the Vanuatu recognition will begin to define Abkhaz diplomacy creating a storyline that is very bad for Abkhazia and allow Georgia to continue to present Abkhaz independence as something which cannot be taken seriously.

Importantly, other than the impact it has on perceptions, this episode may have little effect on the bigger picture issues regarding Georgia and Abkhazia. Russian troops will not leave Abkhazia; the Abkhaz will not decide they want to reconcile with Georgia; European or American policy will not change substantially. In short, the status quo will continue, so Russian influence will grow in Abkhazia, Georgia will find itself with increasingly fewer tools at its disposal and western powers will continue to have no relationships or soft power to leverage with Abkhazia. One of the losers in that scenario will be Georgia, despite the diplomatic victory it is now enjoying.