

Could Turkey be the Next Country to Recognize Abkhazia?

By [Paul Goble](#)

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Despite a year of intense effort, Moscow has secured recognition for the breakaway republics of Abkhazia only from pariah states like Nicaragua and Venezuela and then only by extending aid packages to them so large that even Russian commentators have suggested they represent little more than bribes.

But now, there appears to be a chance that Turkey, despite denials by its officials, might break the embargo against recognition because of Ankara's desire to play a greater role in the Caucasus region, its own long-standing experience as the only country to recognize the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus, and the influence of its own Abkhaz and Circassian communities.

A week ago in Tbilisi, Turkish Foreign Minister Akhmet Davutoglu [said](#) he intends to visit Abkhazia in order to "get acquainted with [that republic] and attempt to regulate its relations with Georgia," thus potentially positioning Turkey to play a role paralleling the one it has

offered to play between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Two days later, Unal Cevikoz, deputy undersecretary of the Turkish foreign ministry, visited Sukhumi and met with Abkhazian Foreign Minister Sergey Shamba. While Turkish officials said that Ankara had informed Georgia about the visit and had not changed its policy of supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia, Cevikoz's visit raised hopes in Sukhumi.

Shamba [told](#) Turkish newspaper Hurriyet that "we certainly hope that Turkey will recognize Abkhazia," adding that "there are some positive signals" that this might happen in the wake of the decisions of Nicaragua and Venezuela to do so.

According to Hurriyet journalist Dondu Sariisik, an additional factor pushing Ankara to explore opening a channel to Abkhazia was the seizure of the Turkish vessel Buket in international waters by Georgian naval forces, which accused the ship of being involved with smuggling oil to Abkhazia.

Shamba said that Abkhazia "wants Turkey to make its position clear that the capture of a Turkish ship in international waters is not admissible. It is in the interest of regional stability to prevent any escalation from taking place." (Davutoglu apparently did just that: Tbilisi released the ship's captain from prison as a result of the Turkish foreign minister's visit.)

"We'd like to develop economic and humanitarian contact with Turkey," Shamba continued, including "the opening of communications and passenger transport." Abkhazia is especially interested in doing so, he said, because there are some 500,000 Turkish citizens of Abkhazian origin, many of whom "have been lobbying for the recognition" of Abkhazia.

Burka Ozugergin, spokesman for the Turkish foreign ministry, said despite the visit of Cevikoz, "there is no policy change in the Caucasus," something that Shamba acknowledged when he said that "it is difficult to say now" when Turkey might take that step, something Turkey's closest allies very much oppose.

But Shamba said that he very much hopes that Turkey will play a mediating role with Tbilisi concerning the Georgian shipping blockade and indicated that he expects to visit Ankara to push this agenda. "We have constant contacts at different levels," he told Hurriyet. "If it is needed we can visit. It is possible in the near future, but it's not yet fixed on the agenda."

Such contacts, which Turkish officials say are entirely "natural" given Turkey's geographic and political position in the world and its own Abkhaz population, do not necessarily point toward recognition, but they do provide yet another avenue for Abkhazia to establish itself on the diplomatic scene, something that is likely to strengthen its cause.

And while Moscow would not seem to be in a position to offer the kind of financial incentive that would lead Ankara to recognize Abkhazia, the Russian government could dangle another possibility: a shift in Russia's position on North Cyprus, which one Russian analyst on Friday [called](#) "the elder brother of Abkhazia."

Any such moves on the political chessboard of the South Caucasus seem extremely implausible &mdash but perhaps no more implausible than Turkey's rapprochement with

Armenia, a development that has not only reordered relations in that region but underscored Ankara's new interest in playing a broader and more independent role there.

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