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Tbilisi Gets a Little Help From Its Somali Friends

By Paul Rimple

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Back in September 2008, Abkhazia's de facto deputy foreign minister, Maxim Gunjia, was explaining his plans to lobby other Latin American nations following Nicaragua and Venezuela's recognition of Abkhazia's independence.

"And what about Somalia? It looks like they're next in line."

"Oh God," he said. "I really hope they don't. We'd rather have Somaliland. It's much more stable, even if it is unrecognized."

Gunjia need not worry now because on Jan. 26, Georgia established diplomatic and consular relations with Somalia, one of the poorest and most violent states in the world.

It doesn't matter that there has been no governmental control over most of Somalia since the 1991 civil war or that it ranks No. 1 in the Fund For Peace index of failed states. What is

important is that Somalia has a seat in the United Nations — a fact Abkhazia understood when it got Nauru, the world's tiniest island nation, a nod for recognition in December 2009, thanks to Russia's $50 million gift to the cash-strapped island.

Tbilisi suddenly understood that if Abkhazia continued to tally seats, it would keep the recognition debate in the UN fresh. Four votes for recognition was one more than the previous year and one step closer to legitimacy.

Georgia was slow to catch on. Its deputy foreign minister, Alexander Nalbandov, was a month behind Gunjia 's spring 2009 Latin American tour, although the ministry insisted that there was no way Bolivia and Ecuador would recognize Abkhazia.

Abkhazia was also courting Iran, which in 2009 was still irate at Georgia for extraditing an Iranian arms smuggler to the United States two years earlier. Georgia, though, was quick to patch things up. As of Jan. 26, the two nations have had visa-free travel regimes.

By the end of the year, Georgia had established communiques with 24 nations, including the radioactive Marshall Islands, human rights grinder Equatorial Guinea and homophobic Uganda. This brings the number to 146 out of 191 UN diplomatic ties for Georgia.

It appears that Georgia isn't so much developing relationships with obscure countries to counter Abkhazia's drive for recognition as much as it is creating the impression that someone's working. But countries like Guatemala certainly weren't being befriended for their investment potential.

Gunjia says he's happy Georgia is friends with Somalia, yet he admits he's concerned about the future. "Will their next step be North Korea?"

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