

A New State's Guide to Gaining International Recognition

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Villagers from Vanuatu's capital island of Efate welcoming U.S. officials to the opening ceremony for a road built with U.S. aid. Cash-strapped Pacific microstates seem to have developed a penchant fo

It's not easy gaining recognition as an independent country.

Abkhazia, a sliver of Black Sea land recognized as sovereign by no one but Russia and three other countries, created a stir last week when it announced that it had convinced a fifth UN member country, the Pacific nation of Vanuatu, to recognize its independence from Georgia.

But then the UN ambassador of Vanuatu — home to more than 80 volcanic islands, 113 indigenous languages and tribal bungee jumping — denied the claim and insisted that his government was dealing with Georgia instead.

The plot thickened when Abkhazia retorted that it had a May 23 treaty signed by the prime ministers of both sides. To drive the point home, it released a copy of the document

to Kommersant, which [published](#) it Tuesday.

The independence fiasco sheds light on efforts by Abkhazia and its handful of supporters to gain recognition — and the lengths that Georgia and its many allies are willing to go to block it. Angry words and claims of lying are common. And the magic card that all sides seem to be eagerly playing is money — much to the glee of apparently wavering countries like Vanuatu.

The independence treaty bearing the signatures of Abkhazia's Sergei Shamba and Vanuatu's Sato Kilman is genuine, Abkhaz foreign ministry spokesman Irakli Tuzhba said by telephone. He said the papers were exchanged through couriers and visits by official delegations were planned for the near future.

But Vanuatu's UN ambassador, Donald Kalpokas, stuck to his position. Reached by telephone in New York late Monday, he said the recognition decision had been withdrawn. "We are out of it," he said.

He refused to elaborate, saying all questions should be directed to the Vanuatu government. "I do not know much of what is going on there," he added, apologetically.

Attempts to contact the leadership in Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital, were unsuccessful Monday and Tuesday.

But Radio New Zealand provided the latest twist Tuesday, quoting John Shing, a senior adviser to Prime Minister Kilman, as saying the recognition was definitely true. "Technically speaking, Vanuatu has agreed to Abkhazia's request, and the reasons why will be revealed soon," Shing said.

In a sign of how fractious Vanuatu's politics are, the report also quoted Interior Minister George Wells as saying that he had received Abkhazia's recognition request in April, when he was foreign minister.

Wells rejected the request "based on advice from senior officials," the report said, without elaborating.

The Georgian government said Tuesday that it was sticking with the UN ambassador's line. "We have no information other than this," said Manana Madzhgaladze, spokeswoman for President Mikheil Saakashvili, according to Georgian media.

Russia, which has remained largely silent amid the Vanuatu debate, was the first country to recognize Abkhazia and Georgia's other breakaway republic, South Ossetia, after a brief war with Georgia in 2008. Only three other UN member states — Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru — have recognized the two regions. All other countries, including staunch Moscow allies like Kazakhstan and Armenia, see them as part of Georgia.

Maya Kharibova, a spokeswoman for the South Ossetian government, could not say why South Ossetia was not part of the Vanuatu treaty. Other countries recognized both territories together or at very close intervals.

But Kharibova said South Ossetia was pursuing its goals independently. "Our foreign ministry

is talking with a range of countries, and any result will be communicated only afterward," she said by telephone from Tskhinvali, the regional capital.

Media reports abounded in December 2009, when the Pacific island of Nauru recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent, that the decision had cost Moscow tens of millions of dollars in aid. Nauru Foreign Minister Kieren Keke admitted that his country had accepted aid from Moscow but denied that this was connected to the recognition decision.

But cash-strapped Pacific microstates seem to have developed a penchant for trading international recognition for foreign aid in recent years.

In 2002, Nauru severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favor of China, only to switch back to Taiwan three years later.

Vanuatu made similar moves in 2004, when Prime Minister Serge Vohor was ousted in a no-confidence vote over his attempt to extend diplomatic relations to Taiwan. The country immediately switched back to recognizing Beijing, which consequently released a million-dollar aid package to Vanuatu earmarked for education.

Vohor briefly resurfaced as prime minister in April, replacing Kilman who had lost a no-confidence motion in parliament. But he was ousted after less than three weeks when Vanuatu's Court of Appeals declared the motion one vote short of the required absolute parliamentary majority.

On May 20, Kilman won another no-confidence vote, reportedly after two lawmakers switched sides in exchange for Cabinet positions. He said after the vote that the political situation remained far from stable. "You only need one or two to switch sides and we're back to square one," he told Radio Australia.

Georgia also entered the game last September when it financed a \$12,000 medical shipment to Tuvalu. Just days earlier, the island state of 12,000 inhabitants voted in favor of a nonbinding UN General Assembly resolution that called for the return of displaced ethnic Georgians to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Analysts said the seesawing on Abkhazia was probably linked to outside influence more than Vanuatu's turbulent politics.

"The basic question is: How big is the pressure from the United States," said Alexander Krylov, a Caucasus expert at the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations.

Krylov suggested that Abkhazia prematurely released the news about the recognition after the death of its president, Sergei Bagapsh, who died in a Moscow hospital on May 29.

Vanuatu has greatly benefited from U.S. aid. In 2006, it signed a five-year \$65.69 million agreement with the United States Millennium Challenge Corporation. Part of the money was used to build a ring road on the capital island of Efate. A [video](#) of the road's opening posted on the Vanuatu government's YouTube channel features villagers waving U.S. flags while a band sings, "Thank you, U.S. government."

Religion is another factor that has strongly linked the islands to the United States in the past.

Vanuatu is home to several so-called cargo cults that developed during World War II, when islanders began to revere U.S. soldiers as gods because they brought goods they had never seen before.

But on Tuesday, a pro-Abkhaz web site [said](#) Vanuatu's biggest cargo cults, the John Frum and Nagriamel movements, supported the region's independence.

"It is a historic moment for our people to recognize each other," the cults' paramount chief, Te Moli Venaos Mol Saken Goiset, said in a statement published on Abkhazworld.com.

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