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Try Telling Tbilisi That You Can't Buy Me Love

By Paul Rimple

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The latest Pacific island nation caught in the tug-of-war struggle of influence between Georgia and Russia is Fiji, which recently received 200 new netbook computers by virtue of Georgia's Education Ministry. The gifts, made in a Tbilisi factory, arrived one week before Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov appeared in Fiji to talk about trade and visa-free travel.

Some critics wonder why the Education Ministry is donating computers to a Pacific island nation most Georgians would have difficulty finding on a map — particularly when there are schoolchildren in Georgia who cannot afford books. They have a point. Why give these speck-sized island countries anything at all?

In September 2010, Georgia gave tiny Tuvalu $12,000 to cover the cost of "transportation of medical cargo" after Tuvalu voted for the Georgia-sponsored resolution at the UN General Assembly for the rights of refugees to return to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Cash-strapped Tuvalu returned the favor a year later by recognizing Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, among rumors

of a Russian payoff.

The Kremlin reportedly gave Nauru $50 million for it's recognition of Georgia's two breakaway republics, which started the whole Pacific island race for favor. But Nauru has made a name for itself to recognize and unrecognize states for profit. After a formal 22-year relationship with Taiwan, Nauru accepted $130 million from China to unrecognize Taiwan's independence. A couple years later, Nauru re-recognized Taiwan in exchange for payment of a $13.5 million debt.

The neighboring archipelago nation of Vanuatu, which also flip-flopped between Taiwan and China, has set itself apart for recognizing and not recognizing Abkhazia at the same time. It recognized Sukhumi in May and retracted a month later, although the foreign minister reaffirmed the recognition. Nevertheless, Vanuatu voted in favor of the Georgia-sponsored UN resolution for refugees' right to return even though it reaffirms recognition of Abkhazia on its government's website.

Moscow has denied it is trading money for recognition, a claim Tbilisi takes with a grain of salt. Georgia can't compete with Russia to buy influence, but at the same time it is not going to sit back and let the Kremlin tally up recognition for the separatists one island at a time. All it can do is make symbolic gestures to help persuade places like Fiji to "remain loyal to international principles" and to resist the urge.

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