

단보

Eurasian Crossroads: Conflicting Spheres of Influence in the Republic of Georgia

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This paper examines the development of the Republic of Georgia through the lens of the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), namely its political and economic reforms, military development and territorial and border integrity. Georgia is attempting to realign with Western Europe and extract itself from the shadow of its former Soviet master. It sees NATO membership as its most important strategic goal and its safest bet for integrating into the international community. Despite improvements in its political, social and military development, Georgia's border disputes, territorial instability, and tensions between Russia and Western Europe have left in doubt Georgia's chances at entering NATO and holding onto control of its own destiny.

1. Introduction

The Republic of Georgia is a small, unassuming country in the heart of the Caucasus Mountains. Known since ancient times as a center of wine and beauty, this little backwater of the former Soviet Empire now finds itself at the crossroads of some very large, global issues.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia has been trying to realign

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itself politically with the West. As a small, emerging democracy, it needs the markets of Europe and the US, as well as their security guarantees and friendship in order to reach its full potential as a modern nation. However, Georgia has not yet fully developed a stable democracy, a military capable of handling the nation's security, stable borders or a controllable and ethnically homogenous population; all factors it needs to gain a firm grasp of its destiny and keep from becoming a failed state.

This paper attempts to isolate the key factors in the Republic of Georgia's attempts to stabilize and carve out a role for itself in the geopolitical sphere of Europe. It is my contention that the most important point in Georgia's future as a state lies in its ability to gain stability within the competing spheres of influence of Russia and the West. Georgia has drawn a tough lot in terms of its borders, and a tougher one in terms of its neighbor, Russia. If Georgia cannot maintain the borders it inherited and ultimately claimed, and create a national identity that all of its inhabitants can accept, it risks permanently losing its breakaway territories and along with it the legitimacy of its leaders. Given the seriousness of its territorial problems, other domestic factors will remain secondary until these are resolved.

This paper will investigate Georgia's development through the criteria set forth in NATO's Membership Action Plan(MAP), in an attempt to evaluate its capabilities not only as an aspiring member of NATO, but also as a nation/state attempting to find its place in the modern world. The choice to evaluate Georgia through NATO membership application was twofold; it spotlights Georgia's developmental strengths and weaknesses and provides insight into the extent of Georgia's problems within its borders and with its neighbors, namely, Russia. First, a brief overview of the requirements for entering NATO will be described. Following that, a point by point analysis of Georgia's preparedness based on those criteria will be given. In regards to

Georgia's military preparedness, I feel that it is necessary to provide background information on the Kosovo precedent that led to war with Russia, along with why Russia perceives Georgia's entrance into NATO and realignment with the West as a threat.

The breakup of the Soviet Union forced an already complicated region into an incredibly complex state of affairs. Russia was left with a new diminished territory and fourteen newly independent and largely unstable states on its borders. The Caucasus region, lying between Russia and the Middle East, is arguably the most complicated of the areas, beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, several aspects that are important to Georgia's stability, such as its relationship with Russia and the 2008 war over South Ossetia and Abkhazia will be discussed only to highlight aspects related to Georgia's internal stability and future direction. Likewise, Georgia's international involvement in the war on terror and its troop commitment to both Afghanistan and Iraq will only be discussed as such that it articulates the achievements and problems in its military.

2. NATO, the Bucharest Summit, and Georgia's Attempt at a Membership Action Plan(MAP)

Georgia sees NATO membership as its most important strategic goal and its safest bet for integrating into the international community. Georgia views admittance into NATO as a means to undermine Russian influence over the republic and provide it with a ready-made group of allies. Membership would create a sense of belonging where Georgia could be seen as a true member of the West and no longer within the Russian sphere of influence.

Across political lines, the Georgian people have consistently stood behind

their leaders in their desire to join NATO. In a poll taken during the presidential election of 2008, 77 percent of Georgians responded affirmatively about their country joining NATO(Zdenek Kriz, 2011). A more recent poll, taken in early 2014, showed that 58 percent of Georgians fully support NATO membership and 60 percent believe Georgia will gain entrance into NATO(STAFF, 2014).

Georgian cooperation with NATO goes back to before the Rose Revolution of 2003. Georgia has been actively participating in NATO operations in a variety of forms since 1994, including the Partnership for Peace, and is one of the founding members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council(EAPC), a successor organization to the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. Georgia officially expressed its interest in joining NATO at the 1994 Prague summit. The government of Mikhail Saakashvili, since coming to power under the Rose Revolution, further intensified efforts to join NATO and in 2004 Georgia proposed its IAP, Individual Action Plan, which created conditions for more engagement with NATO(Zdenek Kriz, 2011).

The push for membership into NATO has been further driven forward by Georgia's younger generation. They see NATO membership as a way for Georgia to extract itself from Russia's shadow and stop existing as semi-failed state. Furthermore, they see Russia as holding Georgia back and maintaining it as a quasi-colony(Asmus, 2010).

The 2008 NATO Bucharest summit was significant in that two states, Albania and Croatia, were granted membership in NATO. Both countries were said to have demonstrated their commitment to the principles of NATO and were seen to be playing an important role in the Balkans and other areas, notably Afghanistan. NATO uses membership as a way to expand influence into Eastern Europe, spread democratic values into former Soviet countries and stabilize the region. Disappointingly for Georgia however, it

was not granted a Membership Action Plan due to opposition by France and Germany(Arbuthnot, 2008).

Admission into NATO begins with the granting of a Membership Action Plan(MAP). MAP is a set of guidelines that aspiring members must implement in order to demonstrate preparedness to join NATO. Briefly but not exhaustively, a state must complete the following actions in order to gain entry: resolution of border and international disputes peacefully, resolution of ethnic disputes within its borders, establishment of appropriate civilian control over the armed forces, refrainment from threat of use of force in inappropriate ways, contribution to peaceful and friendly international relations, maintenance of the alliance through the sharing of responsibilities, and commitment to maintaining stability through social justice and economic liberty(NATO, 1999).

As will be discussed further below, neither Georgia nor Ukraine are perceived to be ready for NATO membership. Rather, both countries appear to be looking for a safe place to gain political acceptance, be recognized for their accomplishments and where they can safely send Moscow a message of their new alignment with the West. In this case, debate over the expansion of NATO appears to have less to do with Georgia's preparedness to join but rather, a debate about the future of NATO enlargement and about Georgia's relationship with NATO Alliance members and with Russia(Asmus, 2010).

Agreements reached at the Bucharest summit were arguably more important and far reaching to Georgia than a MAP. Part of the summit declaration stated that although neither Georgia nor Ukraine would be given MAP at the conference, they would eventually become members of NATO(NATO, 2008). This was a significant departure from previous discussions of NATO expansion. Not even MAP specifically grants such assurances of future membership. Though no time frame was laid out, the principle set forth

seemed to indicate that Georgia would be admitted after a period of cooperation and examination. However, admission of either country into NATO would anger Russia, which sees NATO as a military organization and one that is expanding its operations closer and closer to Russian borders. Russian president Vladimir Putin has stated in no uncertain terms Russia's continuing opposition to NATO expansion(Research, 2008). However, because Georgia needs to resolve its border disputes as a prerequisite to joining NATO, Russia has effectively been handed veto power over Georgian membership in the organization because of its de facto control of the Georgian claimed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, an issue discussed in more detail later in this paper(Arbuthnot, 2008).

At the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, Georgia was given a "substantial package", aiming to enhance Georgian military preparedness and integration into NATO and recognized for its continued advancements in democratic development, peaceful transitions of power in 2012 and 2013, and its contribution to NATO operations in Afghanistan(Janashia, 2014). Georgia once again lost its bid for a MAP. However, the Wales Summit Declaration did reaffirm the 2008 Bucharest Summit promise that Georgia would one day become a member of NATO(NATO, 2014).

1) Georgian Preparations to Join NATO, Successes and Difficulties

As was mentioned above, MAP creates a framework for entry into NATO, a structure that countries can follow to organize themselves politically, militarily and socially in preparation for integration into NATO. The following categorizes Georgia's political, military, territorial and social development relevant to MAP.

2) Georgian Democracy and Economic Reforms

Until the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia could best be characterized as a competitive-authoritarian regime. Space was provided in the political sphere for the opposition and they were allowed to participate in parliament, limited media freedom was permitted, and international organizations had reasonable ability to operate in and monitor the country. Although the Georgian Constitution calls for a separation of powers, most political power is concentrated in the executive branch. Parliament has acted mostly as a rubber stamp since the presidency of Shevardnadze and was not improved upon under the presidency of Saakashvili.

Peaceful transitions of presidential power not involving mass protests and a formal, standardized power transition system did not exist into the presidency of Saakashvili. Furthermore, instances of violence against political protestors have been documented, especially in 2007 when Saakashvili resorted to violence against protestors to his regime (Kriz and Shevchuk, 2011).

Georgia survived the protests of 2007 because of a weak opposition and a lack of support from people living in the provinces outside of the capital territory. However, the government overreaction to the protests, including the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, police beatings and closure of local TV stations undermined the confidence the people had in their belief that the new government had brought something new to Georgian politics (Jones, 2012).

Since 1992, all Georgian elections have been monitored by the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In the 2008 presidential and Parliamentary elections, Georgia still did not have a fair, impartial and intimidation free electoral system. Although the elections were the fairest of any in Georgian history, there were still inconsistencies. While Georgia has made advances in its electoral processes, there is still some way to go in its

reforms. During the 2008 election, the OSCE recorded unprofessional conduct by the Central Election Commission and several reports of voter intimidation. The largest problem was that the government changed election laws, namely the date of the election, a short time before it took place(Hendrickson, 2009).

Georgia's first relatively transparent and fair presidential election, as well as its first smooth transition of power occurred in 2013 when President Mikheil Saakashvili stepped down to be replaced by Giorgi Margvelashvili. Cases of abuse and violence were witnessed during the election but none were seen to have affected the overall outcome. This is seen as progress in Georgia's democratic reforms(Nichol, 2013). Freedom House ratings on political rights, civil liberties and freedom have all increased slightly over the past decade, placing Georgia in the status of "Partly Free"(Roberts, Battisti et al., 2014).

Economically, the new Georgian government began the process of deconstructing Soviet style government, beginning by minimizing taxes, cutting state employment, eliminating government regulation and privatizing industry, including hydroelectric, telephone companies, commercial ports and electrical power distribution. The Saakashvili administration further moved to minimize all forms of government interference in business. The government has tried to remove all traces of its role in economics, with no employment services and little support for Georgian firms. A lot of the state's role in sustaining its economic policy was left to the responsibility of international organizations.

On the surface it seemed as though Georgia's economic reforms were working. However, after an initial success in growth, it became clear that economic liberalism, when transplanted to an unequal society like Georgia, failed to provide ordinary Georgians with jobs(Jones, 2012).

3) Georgian Military Preparedness

Georgian defense policy focus is twofold; protection from external and direct aggression, and NATO integration and readiness. The complex nature of the Caucasus regional environment and limited resources has led Georgia to seek additional security in the form of alliance memberships, namely, membership in NATO. A cornerstone of Georgian defense policy is to transition itself from a territorial defense policy to an international collective force. Military preparedness has therefore shifted focus to integrating its military capacities with NATO, a move seen as critical to the territorial stability of the country.

Currently the largest threat to Georgia lies in its territorial instability and loss of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian military forces within the break-away territories remain a threat and will continue to require attention until their withdrawal.

Military operations outside of Georgia, namely in Afghanistan and Iraq, are seen as integral to promoting stronger relations with NATO countries, as well as to advance military professionalism and readiness. Georgia does not anticipate large scale military operations in its future, but until membership with NATO, it is seen as necessary to develop independent readiness (Georgia, 2010).

The Georgian military plays a unique role among former members of the Soviet Union in its military deployments. Georgia maintains a longstanding and close relationship with the United States military and has received grants to increase interoperability and to enhance efforts to counteract terrorist operations within Georgian borders. Moreover, Georgia sent 2000 troops to Iraq, making it the third largest contingent there and an important one, as it participated in combat operations, although these troops were pulled out in 2008

as a result of the Russia/Georgia War.

In Afghanistan, Georgia played more of a symbolic role, providing only one soldier, despite this being declared NATO's top priority. While it was a small deployment, Georgia argues that its military modernization and cooperation, as well as its strategic location in the Caucasus, would make it a meaningful and useful member of NATO.

Despite Georgian military development, it still lacks the ability to project its armed forces outside of Georgian territory. The GAF's limitations were apparent during the Russian/Georgian war when it had to rely on the US to fly its 2000 troops back from Iraq, lacking the capacity to transport its soldiers between countries. Other weaknesses, stemming from the 2008 war include the destruction and confiscation by Russia of Georgian military equipment, radar stations, air defenses and coast guard vessels.

In short, the Georgian Armed Forces offer limited benefit to NATO, and even less so after its losses in the 2008 conflict. Furthermore, despite Georgian participation in NATO and US led military operations, their calls for help were left unanswered during the conflict with Russia. NATO has not shown itself willing to provide military support against Russia, which brings into question the wisdom of further NATO expansion(Hendrickson, 2009).

The recent increase in tensions between Western Europe and Russia has led NATO to create a 'joint expeditionary force', capable of responding to 'hybrid warfare threats, by wide range of overt and covert military, para-military, and civilian measures in an integrated fashion to deal swiftly with new military tactics(NATO, 2014). This can be perceived as a not too subtle maneuver designed to counter future Russian aggression like was seen in 2008 in Georgia and 2014 in Ukraine, given their inability to effectively defend their own territories.

3. Georgian Territorial Integrity, Relations with Russia, and the Kosovo Precedent

1) Territorial Integrity

Georgia has two secessionist territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Under the Soviet Union, Abkhazia was an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) placed under the control of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). The seeds for Abkhazian independence were sowed at this time and have existed since. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Abkhazians feared their chance for autonomous rule would be undermined by Georgia and in 1992 they declared their independence. Georgia sent in paramilitary troops to try to regain authority but were subverted by Abkhazian forces fortified by fighters from the North Caucasus along with Russian provided equipment and expertise. In the fighting that ensued, Georgian forces were expelled and a de facto Abkhazian state was established, though it is only recognized by four countries internationally. Although Georgia still declares it as Georgian territory, Abkhazia has in most ways successfully seceded. It uses the Russian Rubble as currency, receives retirement pensions from Russia, most citizens hold Russian passports and most ethnic Georgians have been forcefully ejected from Abkhaz territory (Martins, 2010).

Similarly, South Ossetia was controlled by Georgia as an autonomous region of the Soviet Socialist republic of Georgia from 1936 until 1991. In 1998, a group calling themselves the Osseitan Popular Front protested against what it saw as Georgian majority domination. The Georgians reacted strongly, fearing for their territorial integrity. This led to an eventual slide into military confrontation. Georgia, fearing for its territorial integrity, nullified the South Ossetia independent Soviet Socialist Republic declaration. The

resulting armed skirmishes led to assistance from Russia for the South Ossetians. Russian soldiers, under the guise of UN peacekeepers, used this as a pretext for military scouting and troop and equipment buildup in South Ossetia. The pressure of foreign troops on Georgian soil, and back and forth attacks by both Georgian and South Ossetian troops(often from Russian peacekeeping positions) eventually led to the war in August of 2008 war, the de facto takeover by Russia and declaration of independence by both South Ossetia and Abkhazia(Nielsen, 2009).

Stability and integrity of a territory's borders is one of the key requirements outlined in MAP. Georgia has had limited territorial control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia since 1993. In 2008, after the short Russo-Georgia War, it lost practical sovereignty over both. The loss of these territories was devastating to the Georgian people, analogically described as amputation. It diminished and weakened the nation. National identity is characterized by the borders of the country, the shape of the land, and the people who occupy it. The loss of two major pieces of territory can be seen by the people as wounds that will not heal. This social construct of territorial integrity of the Georgian nation can be seen through a variety of government policies and discourses. Large scale campaigns aimed at reiterated that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are integral parts of the country in the Georgian conscience were largely and successfully carried out by President Saakasvili. During campaigning and throughout his presidency, he made it one of his priorities to regain both territories. Memorials for those lost in the 'war for Georgian territorial integrity', movies, literature and youth camps were all used to embed the idea of a map of Georgia, including its lost territories in the minds of the Georgian nation(see photo in appendix). Thus, Georgia continues to exhibit 'cartographic anxiety', the national map of Georgia is used extensively by the government and privately to symbolize Georgia's territorial

integrity, despite its lack of precisely that(Kabachnik, 2012).

2) Relations with Russia

Russia's relationship with Georgia goes back to its incorporation into the Russian empire in the mid eighteenth century when it was used as an outpost for the spread of Russian Orthodoxy on the borders of Turkey and Persia. Georgia experienced a brief period of independence after World War I but was quickly overrun by the Bolsheviks in 1921. The Bolsheviks created the present borders and ethnic political units seen today, an important factor in the territorial disputes Georgia is now facing. Although the three Southern Caucasus regions were initially to be made into one Soviet Federation state, they were instead split into three regions of special status; Abkhazia as a separate republic, South Ossetia as an autonomous province and Adjara, an autonomous republic. This became important as the various groups in the region held firm to these ethnic and regional identities when the Soviet Union collapse and the issue of statehood came up.

Georgia was seen by the elites of Soviet Russia as a playground, replete with good food and warm beaches. At the same time, Georgians played important roles in the Soviet government, most notably Joseph Stalin and Eduard Shevardnadze, later president of Georgia. Many senior officials had family ties in Georgia and the Georgia people represent a significant minority of non-Russians in Russia(Asmus, 2010).

It is important to keep in mind the sense of history and relationships Russia claims in Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The 2008 war with Georgia was delivered to the Russia people as a peace keeping mission to coerce Georgia into peace with South Ossetia. The government in Tbilisi was seen as the aggressor, and Russia as the protector of its citizens(Allison, 2008).

A significant minority of Russian citizens, some immigrants from Russia, others new citizens in the wake of a Russian “passportification” campaign led Moscow to claim that attacks on its citizens abroad(Georgian military expedition into South Ossetia) equated to an attack on its own territory, a shaky and incorrect interpretation of international law. Russia used the Russian citizenship of residents of South Ossetia as legitimacy for its war in Georgia(Allison, 2009). Russia again used its ‘passportification’ tactic in Crimea as a pretext for its annexation of that province(Artman, 2014).

The re-territorialization of the two breakaway territories by Russia signified a capture of Georgian territory that far precluded the 2008 war. Russia naturalized 90 percent of Abkhazian and South Ossetian citizens, effectively bringing them into the political sphere of Russian citizenry and stealing them from Georgia, along with the territory in which they lived. The possession of a Russian passport with its Russian symbols on the front and the words *Rossiiskaya federatsiia* written on it, reinforces to the holder that they are in a particular territory, under a particular government, in this case obviously, Russia. The Russian passport owners in Abkhazia and South Ossetia now held documentation of their otherness to Georgia. Thus, in conjunction with its peacekeeping forces stationed in Georgia, Russia was showing that its power extended into other sovereign territory. Russia used this as a means to secure the territories for itself(Artman, 2013).

3) The Kosovo Precedent

The Kosovo Precedent came about as a result of the February 2008 declaration of independence by Kosovo from Serbia. Fears that this act of secession would set a precedent for other separatist movements led to careful assurances that what happened in Kosovo was a special case. This has raised serious con-

cerns from countries such as Russia, Georgia, Spain, and African countries hosting ethnic minorities with separatist ambitions. Russia consistently argued that recognizing Kosovo would set an undesirable precedent that would have negative consequences on other areas of the world. However, Russia used the same line of reasoning that the West used in Kosovo to justify secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; namely, that the state(Georgia) had forfeited its right to govern its territories(South Ossetia and Abkhazia) through maladministration and human rights abuses against the ethnic minority Ossetians, along the same lines the west used to describe the abuses by Serbia in Kosovo(Nielsen, 2009).

This raises the question of why Russia would use the precedent it so vehemently decried in order to justify its war in Georgia and the secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia is host to over 100 ethnic groups, some of which harbor their own desires for independence. The independence of Kosovo set the one precedent countries like Spain and Russia had been trying to avoid for years. Russia draws a distinction between Kosovo and, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both of the former Soviet satellite republics were economically dependent on Russia. In this context, Russia was able to recognize their declarations of independence while knowing that they were independent in name only. Their reliance on Russia for support would eventually turn them into annexed territories if they destabilize and the governments collapse, thus giving Russia pretext to take them over. Russia was able to use the Kosovo precedent to its advantage while at the same time avoiding alienating its own ethnic minorities. In this way Russia stopped NATO expansion into Georgia and maintained its "near abroad" integrity(Martins, 2010).

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to chart Georgia's development through the framework set forth by the NATO Membership Action Plan(MAP). Georgia has attempted to ride the wave of NATO expansion following the collapse of the Soviet Union and realign itself with Western Europe. However, despite improvements to its military and political institutions, it is unlikely that Georgia will be receiving an invitation to join NATO anytime soon. Forces far greater than the Republic of Georgia are at play in the Caucasus, notably Russian attempts to dominate its 'near abroad' and NATO's desire to expand into former Soviet countries. Russia has taken advantage of NATO fickleness to annex de facto two Georgian territories. NATO's lack of assistance during the Russia-Georgia war and France and Germany's blockade of a Membership Action Plan cast further doubt on the willingness of Alliance states to accept Georgia. Certainly, it is in NATO's interests to think very carefully before making any moves that could draw it into conflict with Russia. Furthermore, the 2008 war severely crippled the Georgian military and led to the loss of large parts of its territory, while at the same time leaving it with two new volatile border regions and Russian troops on its soil.

Relations with Russia are likely to remain rocky in the future. Though the 2008 war is beginning to fade slightly from the Georgian conscience, the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have not. Georgia still believes these are integral parts of the territory and will not likely give them up in the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, Russia has in all but name annexed the two territories, issuing Russian citizenship to nearly all of the people in the territories, stationing troops there and sanctioning the ethnic cleansing of Georgian citizens. The loss of territory weighs heavily on the collective conscious of Georgia, and will not be forgotten. There is much to fear as well, especially

with recent events in Ukraine. The Russian policy of 'passportification' and the fast, poorly run secession vote will leave many worried that the same thing could easily happen in Georgia. Certainly, the inaction of Western European in both Crimea and in the 2008 war leave little doubt that if Russia decides it is time to annex South Ossetia and Abkhazia officially, little is likely to be done in Georgia's defense. Though the Crimean vote to secede has been internationally condemned as invalid, over the course of a few short months, the escalation of fighting in Eastern Ukraine, the missile attack on Malaysia Air 17 and reports of Russian troops operating within Ukrainian territory have further demonstrated Russia's desire to continue manipulating what it considers its exclusive sphere of influence. Though Russia feared the Kosovo protocol, worrying it would send a message to other would be separatists, especially in its own territories it has no problem using the same precedent to further its own ambitions.

Recent events in Ukraine show that Russia has little to fear by alienating its Western counterparts. While the joint expeditionary force and sanctions have shown some results, Western inability to form meaningful and timely coalitions to counter Russia has not only emboldened the Russian Federation to flex its military and political muscle, but have at the same time left countries on the periphery wondering who will come to their aid to counter Russian aggression. American President Barrack Obama has called for a US foreign policy based on collective action, seen by many as weak willed and an attempt to extract the US from its disastrous unilateral policies of last two decades. While in principle, coalition building and negotiated settlements might work, as Russia has shown time and again, notably in its unilateral move to undermine an attack on Syria by coalition forces for using chemical weapons, playing by the old rules does not necessarily work anymore. A more serious and aggressive force will be needed in the future if Europe is going

to counter Russia and stabilize the region once and for all. It is this paper's contention that, though initiatives like the joint expeditionary force may look good on paper improve NATO's response to threats of its own members, they do little to provide assurances to small players like Georgia, caught in the middle of a game it did not start, cannot win, and will never be able quit, as long as those around it want it there.



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Georgia postage stamps, complete with both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Georgian territory.

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