

# POLITICAL CHANGE AND BORDER SECURITY REFORM IN EURASIA: The Case of Georgia

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*This article presents four challenges to promoting border security in post-Soviet Eurasia, even in those states that have experienced regime change and profess new interest in constructing sound state institutions. The analysis is drawn from the specific example of Georgia—a major recipient of U.S. border security assistance and the site of several intercepted efforts of radioactive materials trafficking—but it is relevant to other states in the region, as well. The challenges assessed are: (1) the gradual nature of border regime reform, (2) trade-offs that subordinate border reform to other developmental priorities, (3) bureaucratic inertia and politics, and (4) the continued existence of unrecognized territories that lie beyond the reach of the state and of international law.*

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A weak border regime—one hallmark of a fragile state—hinders the state from playing an active role in the transnational security mosaic the United States has sought to strengthen since September 11, 2001 (9/11). Corruption and a lack of concern for border security not only damage a state's ability to collect revenue and establish the rule of law within its borders, they also leave gaping holes in the transnational security regime, which can be exploited by, at best, traffickers in conventional arms, drugs, and humans and, at worst, terrorists and those trafficking or seeking to traffic in weapons of mass destruction—(WMD)-related materials.

Post-Soviet Eurasia is one area where border security is of particular concern. The states of the Caucasus and Central Asia are sandwiched between Russia, South Asia, and the Middle East and offer transit routes for drug and human traffickers and potential transit routes for WMD-related materials, weapons scientists, militants, and terrorists. The Caucasus, as well as Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus, offer direct routes of entry to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) member states. Enlarging the security of the transatlantic community requires sustained attention to Eurasian border security regimes.<sup>1</sup>

Inadequate border security continues even in the states of Eurasia that have recently professed new commitments to institutional change: Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. New governments in these states have declared an interest in fixing corrupt and dysfunctional border protection and customs regimes, just like other problematic institutions like the police and judiciary. Regime change in post-Soviet Eurasia, however,

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promises only the *possibility* of improvement in the realm of border security, as in other administrative realms. New governments in the region have inherited border regimes marked by severely deficient levels of infrastructure, equipment, and personnel. Vast swaths of many countries' borders remain entirely unmonitored. Combating entrenched smuggling networks, ousting scores of corrupt officials, and preventing patterns of corruption from reemerging require a combination of commitment, leadership, and resources difficult to marshal even under vastly superior circumstances.

Regardless of government commitment to sound institution building, moreover, some post-Soviet states (Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan) also face the challenge of having large portions of their external border under the control of separatist regimes. Authorities in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), Transnistria (Moldova), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan) are under no obligation to establish secure border regimes, and they have colluded with neighboring states (Russia, Ukraine, and Armenia) to establish free border passage into their territories (although in 2005 Ukraine consented to the establishment of a groundbreaking, but limited, EU monitoring mission on its border with Transnistria). In two cases (South Ossetia and Transnistria), internal borders with breakaway regions have been difficult to guard, leaving parent states of Georgia and Moldova with gaping holes in their border regimes. In the cases of Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia, where internal borders with Azerbaijan and Georgia are relatively secure, conflict has still left a border with Iran and an outlet to the Black Sea outside the control of formal state authorities.

There are thus a number of reasons to caution against complacency when it comes to promoting border security in post-Soviet Eurasia, even in those states that have experienced regime change and profess new interest in constructing sound state institutions. This article presents four challenges to border security in Eurasia, drawn from the specific example of Georgia after the Rose Revolution of 2003, but relevant to other states in the region as well. These are: (1) the gradual nature of border regime reform, (2) trade-offs that subordinate border reform to other developmental priorities, (3) bureaucratic inertia and politics, and (4) the continued existence of unrecognized territories that lie beyond the reach of the state and of international law.

The article provides, first and foremost, an analysis of the continuing challenges to border security reform in Georgia. More than two years after the Rose Revolution, Georgia has engaged in highly visible and well-intentioned efforts to improve border protection and customs regimes—reducing bloated levels of personnel, improving customs procedures, and attempting to raise professional standards. “Rings” of corrupt border officials—especially in customs—have been regularly exposed, indicating vigilance on the part of the government but also raising doubts about its ability to quickly put an end to border corruption.

Of further concern, drug trafficking into Georgia has continued since the Rose Revolution, with some officials expressing apprehension that it has even been on the rise. In addition, Georgia's determination to tighten security around Abkhazia and South Ossetia has waxed and waned in competition with other priorities, including reducing the prospects for renewed confrontation with the breakaway regions.

Meanwhile, the department of border protection has institutionally been stunted. It has received limited funding from the state budget, its leadership has been accused of incompetence and even corruption, and border guards have retained a limited role in the monitoring of illegal border traffic. By contrast, state funding of defense and internal security has been generous, leadership personnel in other ministries and departments have been reshuffled, and customs authorities, concerned more about revenue collection than border security, have reigned supreme at border checkpoints.

Before the Rose Revolution, significant attention was paid to upgrading Georgia's border security at the Chechen sector of the Russian-Georgian border, in response to cross-border traffic of militants into Georgia's Pankisi Gorge.<sup>2</sup> But improving security at the Chechen-Georgian border is only a start. With more significant cross-border traffic across other sectors of the Russian-Georgian border, as well as to and from Central Asia, the Middle East, Turkey, and Europe, border security for Georgia requires a global approach in which border development becomes more an integral part of state building and less a specialized response to particular threats emanating from Russia. Such an approach, in turn, can only help Georgia meet its aspirations of integrating more fully into the Euroatlantic community.

An examination of Georgian border security reform also provides a cautionary note regarding the challenges of border protection and customs reform throughout post-Soviet Eurasia, both in states that have recently experienced regime change (Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine), as well as in other states that face obstacles in developing effective border security regimes. The challenges of border security reform in Georgia are hardly unique; border regimes throughout Eurasia are severely underfinanced, underdeveloped, and penetrated by corruption. Border security in Central Asia, in particular, requires arguably even greater attention, given the complexity of interstate borders in the region, the high importance of daily cross-border trade and communication, a high level of narcotics trafficking originating in Afghanistan, and past experiences of cross-border Islamic militant activity.<sup>3</sup> Despite its March 2005 regime change, for instance, Kyrgyzstan likely confronts many of the same challenges of border reform facing Georgia—perhaps to an even greater degree.

### **After Political Change in Post-Soviet Eurasia: Four Challenges to Border Security**

The first challenge to building effective border security regimes in Eurasia stems from a low starting point. All post-Soviet states, with the exception of Russia, had to build border security regimes from scratch after becoming independent. New international borders between post-Soviet neighbors had to be protected for the first time; many sectors of these former internal borders have remained entirely open for years. For some former Soviet states, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan among them, the Russian Federal Border Service retained primary control over external Soviet-era borders until the end of the 1990s (in the case of Tajikistan, until 2005). A transition period to an appreciably more effective (and less corrupt) border regime will take years, a period of time in which persistent cross-border crime may continue and the process of reform itself can even be derailed.

A second challenge is that institution building involves trade-offs that can subordinate border security to other developmental priorities. Reform-minded post-Soviet states are right to be concerned about improving the fiscal aspects of their border regime, but what eases the transit of goods and collection of duties can also hinder efforts to increase security. Additionally, tightening control over illegal border traffic can heighten interethnic tensions, as members of minority populations accustomed to a freer mode of trade with coethnics across the border are targeted in anti-contraband operations or find their livelihoods threatened. Finally, resources can be diverted to areas that the state's leadership determines require more urgent attention—the armed forces, say, or the police.

Third, border security reform remains vulnerable to bureaucratic inertia and politics. Structural inertia often prevents institutions from being transformed as smoothly as one would anticipate given the existence of political will. Bureaucratic (and just plain) politics can also pose obstacles to the construction and reform of border institutions and the functional division of responsibilities among them.

Fourth, some Eurasian states seeking to regulate traffic across their borders still contend with breakaway territories, so-called grey zones, that remain beyond their control and outside international law and convention. Reducing the transnational security threat posed by these unrecognized states—as well as other territories potentially operating beyond the state's watchful eye—should remain a central objective of those seeking improvements in border security in Eurasia. Either political solutions to territorial conflicts must be found, or territories, neighboring states, and parent states must be pressured to permit vastly improved local border security regimes even in the absence of political solutions to conflict.

The second and third points above reflect challenges that plague even wealthy, powerful, open, and established states. Before and after 9/11, the United States had trouble identifying the ideal balance between efficient commerce and border security; bureaucratic inertia and politics also hindered U.S. efforts to improve its border regime. External states should not assume that new Eurasian governments will have more virtuosity or capability in reforming their border security institutions than they have. This does not mean they cannot urge changes in other states' border regimes, or assist them to attain at least minimally acceptable standards. In doing so, however, they must comprehend the obstacles—both familiar and unique—that stand in the way of the establishment of an effective transnational security mosaic in Eurasia and beyond.

### **The Case Study: Georgia**

The points above stem from an investigation of border security reform in Georgia, based in part on interviews with government officials in Georgia's national security council, ministry of internal affairs, ministry of state security (which has since merged with the interior ministry), ministry of defense, state border protection department, and customs department, together with consultations with non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives and U.S. officials and advisors. Interviews in Georgia took place in October 2004 and April 2005.

Georgia was selected as a case study for five reasons. First, Georgia was the first state in the region to evince a new commitment to institution building. A study of Georgia provides a broader span of time than a study of Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan to draw preliminary conclusions regarding the effect of regime change on border security in Eurasia.

Second, by virtue of its geography, Georgia is a transit country linking several other states of interest to nonproliferation specialists: Russia and the North Caucasus, Central Asia (including Afghanistan), Iran, Turkey, and—by land or the Black Sea—Europe. Georgia's location "at Europe's edge" makes that state a case of intrinsic interest to nonproliferation specialists.

Third, since Georgia became independent, it has been the site of an unusually high number of cases of intercepted efforts to traffic in radioactive materials that could be used to help produce a so-called dirty bomb. Since 1999, Georgian officials have apprehended traffickers in radioactive materials at least seven times.<sup>4</sup> In addition, stray radiation sources, left in Georgia since Soviet times, have been discovered on numerous occasions, sometimes exposing individuals to radiation sickness. Observers fear that many radioactive sources have already gone missing; as recently as June 2005, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) dispatched an inspection team to Georgia in an effort to track down lost materials.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, the study of border security reform in Georgia is of special interest to U.S. policymakers, since the country has been a major recipient of U.S. border security assistance since 1998, via the Georgian Border Security and Related Law Enforcement (GBSLE) program. This program has been a disproportionately large element of the broader U.S. Export Control and Related Border Security Assistance (EXBS) program (the GBSLE program derives officially from a separate budget stream). From 2002 to 2004, GBSLE assistance made up 20 percent of the total assistance budgeted by EXBS for programs in more than 40 countries worldwide, and 29 percent of the total assistance budgeted for programs in the successor states of the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on Georgian border security assistance, whatever its cause, calls for a close assessment of progress in the Caucasus republic's border security reform.

Finally, since two of the four grey zones in Eurasia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are in Georgia, the case study allows us to focus closely on the challenges for border security such unmonitored territories represent. These challenges are not identical across all unrecognized territories in Eurasia. Still, by more precisely identifying the "fit" between theoretical challenges to international security posed by unrecognized territories and actual, identifiable threats in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, we can better understand not only the roles these unrecognized territories play in Georgian border security but also draw preliminary conclusions about unrecognized territories elsewhere.

While an overall picture of border reform in Georgia was sought, via interviews with central government officials, six border "points" were selected to examine in detail, as they provided a sampling of both north-south and east-west traffic through Georgia. These are the "de facto" borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Georgian-Azerbaijani Red Bridge border crossing, the Black Sea ports of Poti and Batumi, and the Georgian-Turkish border crossing at Sarpi (the last two checkpoints are located in Georgia's autonomous republic, Adjara).<sup>7</sup>

*The First Challenge of Border Security Reform: Gradual Transitions*

Regime change in Georgia (as in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan) does not allow an easing of attention to border security issues. While political change may be sudden, border regime reform is gradual. Even in states that have renewed their efforts to construct sound administrative institutions, the process often begins at a woefully low starting point, it is gradual, and it is fragile. The risk that reforms will not take hold continues to be real. This is as true in border security regimes as it is for other underdeveloped institutions.

*A Low Starting Point.* After years of limited government attention, Georgia's border protection department promised to achieve new standing after the Rose Revolution. In February 2004, the department, which took full responsibility for Georgia's borders only in 1999, was subordinated (as a largely autonomous organ) to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with the intention of transforming it into a civil, rather than military, institution. The department's budget increased by 24 percent from 2003 to 2004, and by another 35 percent from 2004 to 2005.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the border protection department's increased budget, in absolute terms the finances available to it in the two years after the Rose Revolution remained slim. In 2004, the department had a budget of 14.4 million lari, or approximately \$7.9 million; in 2005, its budget was 19.5 million lari (\$10.8 million). Even in a small country like Georgia (with a population of 4.5 million), such funds are unable to go very far. Because of minimum wage requirements for department personnel introduced in March 2005, the amount did not even cover the modest salaries of the department's approximately 6,000-strong staff (already reduced from more than 8,500 personnel since 2003).<sup>9</sup> According to the chair of the border protection department, Badri Bitsadze, the department required "at a minimum" 40 to 45 million lari (\$22–25 million) to operate normally.<sup>10</sup> As one senior interior ministry official described the situation in April 2005, "The border guards are in a very bad situation. They lack funds and are extremely poor."<sup>11</sup>

The department's limited budget has affected procurement of many basic elements of border crime prevention. Interviewed in April 2005, officials at border protection and customs offices at the Black Sea ports of Poti and Batumi, the Georgian–Turkish land border at Sarpi, and the Georgian–Azerbaijani Red Bridge border crossing—the main entry and exit points for east–west traffic through Georgia—repeatedly lamented the lack of X-ray detectors and trained dogs for assistance in apprehending illicit materials at their checkpoints. The head of the border protection office in the port city of Batumi—a few kilometers north of Sarpi—asserted that with the proper equipment, they could increase by "ten times" their interception of suspected criminals. However, he observed, "[w]e don't have [the right equipment]. We're doing everything with our bare hands."<sup>12</sup>

The Coast Guard, subordinated to the border protection department, has had its own distinct concerns. In recent years, its main worry has been the lack of a steady supply of fuel. A senior Coast Guard official also observed that a radar station the United States provided several years ago needed to be replaced. The radar station had a range of 120 miles, providing the Coast Guard with the ability to intercept virtually all ships seeking to

dock illegally in Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia (for more on Abkhazia, see below). The shorter-range radar station they had to use in its stead allowed ships to pass through Georgian waters unimpeded.<sup>13</sup>

Radiation detectors—donated by the United States—have been installed at several Georgian border points, including all those investigated (the Poti port, on both railway and motor entries; Red Bridge; and Sarpi).<sup>14</sup> These detectors may have already helped Georgian officials apprehend would-be traffickers at checkpoints at the Georgian–Russian and Georgian–Armenian borders.<sup>15</sup> Still, even the U.S. General Accounting Office (now Government Accountability Office) has acknowledged that the radiation detectors the United States has donated to Eurasian states “would likely” not detect “a small amount of material shielded by a lead container” or any highly enriched uranium.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to this general problem, Georgian border guards working at the Georgian–Turkish border checkpoint issued two complaints about the operation of their radiation detectors. First, they observed that the radiation-detecting portal monitor pedestrians pass through on their way to Turkey was not operating, thanks to a lack of electricity.<sup>17</sup> Second, they noted that a U.S.-donated mounted radiation detector was operating only for inbound traffic from Turkey; for outbound traffic, officials used a less effective handheld monitor and examined only potentially suspect cargoes, such as those carrying scrap metal and timber.<sup>18</sup> Georgian authorities have intercepted would-be uranium traffickers in Batumi no less than three times; the double protection that a mounted radiation detector on outbound traffic at Sarpi would provide (i.e., coupled with whatever equipment the Turkish side employs) would be worthwhile. The head of Batumi's border protection office concurred, noting that a considerable amount of scrap metal passes through Georgia to Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, in 2005 the border protection department continued to lack a nationwide “live” data network. Supported by U.S. assistance, its communications network has been “pretty effective,” according to an American advisor, and is, in fact, the only “24/7 nationwide communication network.”<sup>20</sup> This communications capability, however, has yet to extend to informational data. Border guard officials at Sarpi explained that every few hours they physically transferred data to regional headquarters in Batumi. The regional border protection head at Red Bridge also noted that a computerized network linking all borders instantaneously was not yet in operation. An interior ministry official interviewed emphasized that the department—allegedly so lacking in funds at one point that it had its telephone service disconnected for lack of payment—had no way of transmitting data on fugitives, stolen vehicles, and other concerns to, and among, border checkpoints.<sup>21</sup> The border protection department has requested financial assistance from the United States to support the establishment of a full data network.<sup>22</sup>

This assistance, if forthcoming, would follow a clear trend of dependency of Georgia's border security department on U.S. assistance. From 1998 to 2005, the United States government allocated approximately \$135 million to Georgia in border security assistance. In 2005, this assistance, administered through the GBSLE, stood at \$15 million—in other words, more than the border protection department's entire annual budget.<sup>23</sup> With this aid, the United States virtually underwrote the establishment of Georgia's Coast Guard, a project that began in 1997. GBSLE has also provided training,

supplies, equipment, uniforms, infrastructure, helicopters, ships, aircraft, and vehicles to the Georgian border protection department, and has trained and supplied the customs department and other relevant agencies.<sup>24</sup> In 2005, new, modern customs facilities constructed with U.S. assistance and equipped with U.S.-donated tool kits, fiber-optic inspection scopes, and other equipment, began to open—the first in May at the Red Bridge, to be followed by Poti, Batumi, and the Georgian–Russian border crossing of Zemo Larsi.

Border protection and customs officials at all levels have expressed great appreciation for this assistance. In some cases, particularly in the Coast Guard, they report that it has been indispensable. Still, when interviewed in April 2005, officials noted that the assistance was insufficient for their needs, and that they still lacked much basic equipment required to make Georgia's border security regime acceptably effective.<sup>25</sup>

*Reform Often Gradual.* Aside from the fact that the construction of border security regimes begins at an extremely low level, reforms do not occur overnight. While observers might sensibly countenance patience, during a prolonged process of institutional change, reforms can stall or even be reversed.

In Georgia, prominent efforts were made after the Rose Revolution to tackle corruption in the customs and border protection departments. Heavy decreases in staff removed not only much deadwood but also hundreds of low-level officers accustomed to taking bribes at the border. By spring 2005, a customs staff of 2,500 had already been reduced to just over 1,000. The newly appointed head of the customs department, Zurab Antelidze, indicated that, in all, as much as 80 percent of the former staff would eventually be let go. Existing personnel and new applicants would be required to undergo professional examination and certification.<sup>26</sup>

At the regional level, senior border protection and customs officers have undergone heavy rotation since the Rose Revolution, and a pattern of appointing government "minders" appears to have been established. By pairing a local customs or border protection officer with an official from outside the region, either with an established record of success or with close ties to the ruling party, the government appears to be trying to improve monitoring at the borders, while maintaining local professional continuity and/or assuaging local sensitivities (especially in Adjara, effectively out of central government control until 2004). The central government's close interest in the operation of regional offices can act as a constraint against business-as-usual in the customs and border protection regional offices and at border checkpoints.

Be that as it may, while the Georgian customs department reported an impressive 57 percent increase in revenues between 2003 and 2004, reducing smuggling and corruption at the borders has remained a continual process.<sup>27</sup> The first post-Rose Revolution head of the customs department, Levan Kistauri, was rapidly removed from his post after a court case was prepared against him on corruption charges related to his previous tenure overseeing excise stamp issuance in 2002–2003.<sup>28</sup> His successor, Deputy Finance Minister Giorgi Godabrelidze, was appointed in March 2004 with the cautionary note that he had two months "to achieve a real breakthrough" in customs reform. By October, he had outlived his welcome: Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili warned that corruption in

the customs department was continuing and gave Godabrelidze one month to increase customs revenues substantially, imploring the customs department “to stop tormenting the people once and for all.”<sup>29</sup> Godabrelidze was dismissed in February 2005 (though he returned to his post as deputy foreign minister) and replaced by Antelidze, also a deputy finance minister who had coauthored Georgia’s new tax code.

In addition to these turnovers, the government carried out several police raids at regional customs offices through 2005. These resulted in the firing and arrest of a number of local customs officials. Such raids demonstrated that the government was forced to continue fighting border corruption well into the second year after the Rose Revolution. The border raids netted sums totaling only several thousand dollars, with individual bribes of several hundred dollars. This relatively low sum suggests one of two things: Either border corruption is limited in its scope, or larger violations are proceeding unnoticed.

Customs officials in Batumi—the new headquarters of one of Georgia’s two newly restructured regional customs offices (“West Customs”)—were relatively direct about the fact that corruption continued to some degree under their watch. Under former president Eduard Shevardnadze, when Adjara was run as a *de facto* fiefdom of the local ruler Aslan Abashidze, the local customs department was thoroughly corrupt, they explained. Now, they said, local customs officials were “working a bit more” to reduce corruption, recording tonnage and customs duties ever more properly, as well as limiting “privileges” to favored importers.<sup>30</sup> Such admissions indicated progress, but also that West Customs had some way to go. Sure enough, in October 2005, the head of West Customs and four of his subordinates were arrested and removed from their posts on charges of corruption. Two months later, Georgian police conducted another crackdown at Sarpi, arresting 24 customs officers.<sup>31</sup>

East Customs, as well, continued to be plagued by corruption and contraband. The deputy customs head at the Red Bridge noted how “in earlier times,” officials “had pressure coming at them from all sides” to bring in unrecorded revenues but that they are now “trying to help” fight against contraband. An interior ministry official volunteered that the border with Azerbaijan remained “very porous” and that smuggling had actually been getting worse.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, just hours after interviewing the deputy head of customs at the Red Bridge border crossing in April 2005, a raid led to the arrest of five of his subordinates.<sup>33</sup> Checkpoints at Georgian–Armenian border crossings, too, were marked by continued corruption in late 2005; in November, the head of the Sadakhlo checkpoint and seven of his subordinates were removed.<sup>34</sup>

The department of border protection has also not remained immune to corruption. After the Rose Revolution, U.S. officials contended that reform of land border protection (not the Coast Guard, regarded as reasonably clean) was occurring quite slowly. One reason was the continued tenure of the longstanding deputy chairman of the border protection department, a former customs chief appointed to his position in 1998 by Shevardnadze. Known to be “extremely corrupt,” this man’s presence was even “making questionable” future U.S. assistance to the border guards, according to an American advisor. It took until December 2004 for the new government to release him from his post. In April 2005, one interior ministry official maintained that the department had still “not been reformed at all” and that it remained “very corrupt.”<sup>35</sup>

In March 2005, department chair Bitsadze acknowledged, as justification for greater funding for his department, the continued existence of at least petty corruption at border checkpoints. "Imagine a border guard, with no clothes, cold, hungry, thirsty, who is offered some kind of payment," said the chairman. "Sure it is hard to refuse . . . for even a cigarette, he might let [violators] pass."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, while the average monthly wage of border guards increased after the Rose Revolution, it not only remained very low in absolute terms—119 lari (\$65) in the spring of 2005—it compared unfavorably with the situation at the ministry of defense and elsewhere in the ministry of internal affairs, where the average monthly wage stood at 272 lari (\$149) and 338 lari (\$186).<sup>37</sup>

Still, efforts to improve the functioning of the border protection department have existed, despite limited resources and/or the will to push more rapidly for reform. A wholesale reorganization of the department began in 2004, and plans to provide civilian border protection training to its staff were accelerated.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, border guards interviewed provided insight into the improvisational techniques they had developed due to lack of financing or organization. The head of the border protection office in Batumi explained the ad hoc system of border control he introduced at Sarpi—when a passport control officer input data linked to a person of interest, the computer system would not allow the officer to proceed. Instead, the officer was required to report to a senior official, who would then take over the passport check. This, he indicated, was to prevent the "spread of information" and, presumably, the ability of passport officers to take a bribe from a suspect and let him freely cross the border.<sup>39</sup>

At the Red Bridge crossing, the solution to limited institutional resources took on an entirely different cast. Here, personal relations appeared to substitute for technical improvisation. The head of the border protection regional office explained that he used to be a prominent official in Georgia's security ministry (which merged in 2004 with the interior ministry) and that he helped rear its top officials. Consequently, according to the official, he had "good connections" in the "security ministry" (*sic*), who stood ready to assist him with anything he needed.<sup>40</sup>

The Coast Guard has had a unique solution to addressing its budgetary shortfall. In addition to its considerable U.S. support, the Coast Guard has had success apprehending boats engaged in various border violations, including illegal fishing and attempts to travel to Abkhazia without Georgian permission. From 1999 to 2004, the Coast Guard detained 53 vessels (mainly Russian, Turkish, and Ukrainian, but also vessels flying Greek, Indian, and Azerbaijani flags). As a result, the Coast Guard collected 2,730,000 laris (some \$1.5 million) in fines through 2004, mostly since the Rose Revolution.<sup>41</sup> By April 2005, the Coast Guard had collected another 300,000 lari (\$165,300).<sup>42</sup>

*The Red Bridge Market.* One significant structural impediment to combating smuggling exists at the Red Bridge border crossing near Azerbaijan. A major source of cross-border trade for local villagers is the Red Bridge open-air market, located formally in the buffer zone territory between Georgian and Azerbaijani state borders. The location of a commercial market in this political "no-man's land" is enough to raise caution. The market is located, physically, on the Georgian side of the border: To enter after crossing through the Georgian border checkpoint, one "doubles back" across a bridge branching off the

main road. The market is, however, under Azerbaijani jurisdiction and flies an Azerbaijani state flag. A road leads out of the market directly into Georgia, bypassing the main border checkpoint.<sup>43</sup>

The utility of the market for bringing contraband into Georgia is clear. In the past, lax checks and corruption permitted goods from the market to be conveniently imported into Georgia without payment of proper duties. Furthermore, until spring 2005, all that was required for Georgian citizens to cross into the market (and on into Azerbaijan proper) was an easily falsifiable internal identification card, not a passport. Georgian residents living nearby were able to use the ease of transit to cross the border several times a day to make repeat purchases of goods in the market for internal sale, circumventing regulations permitting the duty-free import of goods totaling only 300 lari (\$165) or less.<sup>44</sup>

Recent changes promise to make it more difficult to bring contraband into Georgia via the Red Bridge market. Thanks to regulations established by the Azerbaijani side, Georgian citizens are now required to have an international passport to enter Azerbaijan. In spring 2005 the Georgian side was preparing to impose a regulation permitting its citizens to cross into Azerbaijan (and the Red Bridge market) only once a day. The express purpose of the regulation was to reduce the influx of contraband.<sup>45</sup>

Still, the potential for abuse remains. First, it was not clear how this passport regulation would be enforced for those entering only the bazaar, as individuals do not undergo an Azerbaijani border check to enter it. Georgian officials, together with Azerbaijani policemen patrolling the market, must be responsible for maintaining the new passport regime. A local border guard pointed out a second problem: As customs reform diminishes the ability of importers to bring contraband cargo directly across the Red Bridge checkpoint, pressure to use the market as a base for contraband trade increases. Importers sell off portions of their cargo locally for later cross-border trade, thereby reducing payments of customs duties.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to offering benefit for conventional smuggling, the anomaly of the Red Bridge market was worrisome with regard to a potentially wide range of trans-border criminal activity. Law enforcement at the market appeared to be only as tight as local Azerbaijani police, technically not even obligated to enforce state law, wanted it to be. Also, going to the market requires a foreign traveler to have his or her passport checked only at a single border checkpoint, with no corresponding check from the other side. This means that fugitives or individuals not welcome in either Georgia or Azerbaijan could freely “disappear” to meet associates and buyers at the market. The presence of a small hotel on the territory of the bazaar permitted even extended stays in this “no-man’s land.”

*The Persistence of Drug Trafficking.* In spring 2005, the persistence—and, some suggested, even increase—in drug trafficking across Georgia’s borders was an especially jarring issue given the new government’s activism in combating contraband.<sup>47</sup> Officials cited virtually all major border crossings as likely entry points for the import of drugs into Georgia, but especially the Turkish and Azerbaijani land borders (which had become more significant, insisted one regional customs official, than the illegal north–south drug trade that previously flourished via the breakaway republic of South Ossetia and the Pankisi Gorge).<sup>48</sup> In April 2005, television news reports discussed raids on homes in villages near

the Azerbaijani border where authorities suspected narcotics were stashed, and an alarming rise in the import of drugs into Georgia from Turkey and Western Europe. Officials mainly complained about opium, heroin, marijuana, and especially Subutex, a medication used to alleviate heroin dependence that Georgia banned due to local abuse.<sup>49</sup>

Officials offered little explicit information regarding the use of Georgia as a transit corridor (rather than destination) for major drug trafficking. Still, the deputy customs head at the Black Sea port of Poti noted that chances were “very high” that illegal drugs, including from Azerbaijan and Afghanistan, were passing through Poti to points further west. The deputy customs head at Red Bridge also volunteered that he “did not exclude” the possibility that sealed trucks, marked for transit, were transporting drugs through Georgia (for more on transit traffic, see below).<sup>50</sup>

One peculiar finding of this research was a contradiction among border protection and customs officials regarding the main points of entry for drugs into Georgia. A senior customs official in Tbilisi asserted that drugs were coming in more through Turkey than Azerbaijan (the latter has conventionally been assumed to be the greater source of drugs).<sup>51</sup> However, officials at the border protection department in Tbilisi and West Customs headquarters in Batumi disagreed, asserting that the Azerbaijani border remained a much more significant entry point for drugs. Customs officials in Batumi responded with incredulity to the assertion that another official had said more drugs were coming in from the west than from Azerbaijan.<sup>52</sup>

Local border guards—in theory those chiefly responsible for interdicting drug transit (but see below)—also offered contradictory answers regarding the direction of drug trafficking into Georgia. The head of the Batumi border protection office, when queried about trafficking from Turkey, modestly acknowledged that “an official who says everything is fine at [his] border is not a professional.” This contradicted sharply the strident assertion of the head of the border protection department at Red Bridge, who said that drugs “are not entering” Georgia from Azerbaijan. When pressed, he said that drugs were mainly entering Georgia from Turkey (citing, specifically, the lesser-developed border crossing at Vale, not Sarpi) as well as the Tbilisi airport. “Not in my sector” was his last word on the subject, when pressed yet again. The deputy head of the local customs office similarly asserted that only “a small amount” of drugs—marijuana mostly—was coming through Red Bridge. He insisted that drugs primarily came into Georgia from the North Caucasus and via the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>53</sup>

This, however, was not the last word on the import of drugs from Azerbaijan. One border guard at Red Bridge, unaware of his chief’s responses, noted “many instances” of apprehending drugs, including heroin and methadone, at the Azerbaijani border. The deputy customs head at Red Bridge allowed that the Georgian–Azerbaijani crossing at Udabno, where there was no customs check, would “logically” be an entry point for drugs.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the Azerbaijani–Georgian border has a few semi- or non-functioning official border checkpoints and can be freely crossed at numerous points. Udabno itself lies just kilometers away from Red Bridge and is located in the same sector of the Georgian–Azerbaijani border, thereby making suspect the claim of the Red Bridge border guard head that drugs were not passing through “his sector.”

Such disagreements among officials located in different parts of the country suggest either a lack of information flow regarding the direction of drug trafficking, an instinct to protect one's "turf," or, at worst, efforts to obscure a degree of continued toleration of the cross-border drug trade.

### *Case Study Conclusions*

The low starting point for reform and the persistence of corruption and smuggling suggest a need for a realistic assessment of the prospects for border reform in even Eurasian states that experience dramatic regime change. High levels of turnover can eliminate a number of corrupt staff, but they may also eliminate trained (if corrupt) personnel and lead to extended periods of training for new ones. The possibility that continued low-level corruption serves as an "off-the-books" incentive to encourage officials to increase reported revenues to the state also can not be excluded. Even if this proves not to be the case, managing the technical requirements of fighting contraband and the human resource requirements of ensuring that new personnel do not resort to the corrupt practices of earlier ones require constant effort.

At best, recognition of the gradual nature of reform suggests a need to strike a balance between acknowledging a certain degree of ongoing smuggling and corruption, as infrastructure and state capacity develop, and maintaining vigilance against the kinds of cross-border trafficking that pose broader international security threats.

### **State-Building Trade-Offs**

While reformist governments seek to diminish corruption and transit of contraband, and thereby improve border security, they face other state-building demands that can militate against steady improvements in border security. At least three potential trade-offs exist, regarding the promotion of commerce, ethnic stability, and other security organs.

#### *Commerce vs. Border Security*

Governments seeking to pull their countries out of "at-risk" status—and customs officials whose jobs have become dependent on delivering significant revenues to the central government—can be more focused on the fiscal aspects of the border regime than the security aspects. "Clean" customs officials aim to encourage importers and transit companies to declare their goods, pay appropriate duties, and traverse their routes frequently. As the head of Georgia's West Customs put it, the customs department is responsible for "fiscal policy. . . . We try to send as much money as possible" to the central government.<sup>55</sup> For their part, external patrons and advisors—with good reason—champion an efficient and increasingly honest customs service in Georgia that eases trade and business and delivers needed revenues to the state.<sup>56</sup>

Easing the customs regime, however, creates new openings for cross-border trafficking. One of these regards *transit traffic*. Georgia is a transit corridor linking Turkey, the Black Sea, and points further west with Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iran, Central Asia, and

even Afghanistan and the Middle East. Since the Rose Revolution, the customs department has reduced fees for transit traffic; in general, officials have expressed interest in facilitating ease of transit trade.<sup>57</sup> Customs officials frequently asserted that Georgia's acceptance of the Transports Internationaux Routiers (TIR) carnet system, managed by the Geneva-based International Road Transport Union (IRU), enables authorities to allow sealed transit traffic in possession of TIR carnet vouchers to pass through the country unimpeded. While inspection of transit cargo is permitted by the TIR carnet system, Georgian officials repeatedly indicated that they would not do regular random searches or otherwise investigate transit traffic, unless they had "operational information" that would lead them to suspect a particular vehicle or driver.<sup>58</sup>

This, however, suggests that if traffickers in illicit items were to obtain access to the trucks of a transport company that had TIR carnet vouchers, they could arrange for their illicit cargo to make its way undetected across Georgia to the Turkish land border or Black Sea ports (barring any radioactive material identified by radiation detectors). Indeed, in its 2005 International Narcotics Strategy Report, the U.S. State Department observed that "[t]hinly staffed ports of entry and confusing and restrictive search regulations make TIR . . . trucks the main vehicles for narcotics trafficking" through Georgia.<sup>59</sup> The head of the border guards in Batumi similarly insisted that if transit traffic were subject to inspection, it would drastically diminish the amount of drugs coming across the border.<sup>60</sup> In general, an accommodating attitude toward transit traffic—while rational and, from a commercial perspective, welcome—can make smuggling of illicit items easier than when carriers of transit cargo were stopped regularly while wending their way through the country (in which case there was at least a chance especially dangerous cargo would be apprehended).

Another aspect of the trade-off has occurred thanks to a customs regulation that permits importers to pay customs duty at their final destination, rather than at the border. In Georgia, importers are required to declare goods with a value of 300 to 700 lari (\$165 to \$385) at the border; goods with a value of more than 700 lari (\$385) may instead be cleared either at large customs facilities several kilometers inside the border or at their final destination. Large cargoes are sealed at the border, and their carriers are required to clear customs in 10 days' time.<sup>61</sup> This system is efficient for importers and reduces the possibility for corruption at border checkpoints, as large amounts of money do not change hands.

At the same time, the system risks the "disappearance" of cargoes in-country, en route to clearing customs. If importers only declare their cargo at the border, but do not pay duties, customs officials are likely to be less rigorous in inspecting goods, as ultimate responsibility for proper customs clearance lies with officers at the final destination. En route, carriers of illicit goods can shed portions of their cargo, or illicit materials they have smuggled, for sale or handoff prior to inspection.

Another advantage to smugglers was suggested by a senior customs official in Tbilisi, who noted that the customs department processes its data only twice a month to assess whether importers have paid their duties.<sup>62</sup> This means that the 10-day requirement for clearing customs really stretches into 15 or more days for many importers, depending on in what part of the month they entered the country. Similarly, verification that transit cargoes departed the country at their specified time also occurs only periodically, giving cargo identified as "transit" for the purposes of avoiding inspection several more days to

"disappear." The department of border protection, in seeking assistance for the establishment of a computerized data network, has noted that such a network will help eradicate this problem.<sup>63</sup>

### *Ethnic Stability vs. Border Security*

Georgia, which is dealing with two unresolved territorial conflicts and seeking to avoid further interethnic strife, needs to avoid measures that aggravate ethnic tensions. In addition to increasing tensions with the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (see below), the potential for a new flare-up of conflict has been of concern with regard to the fight against smuggling near the Azerbaijani border. Georgia's ethnic Azerbaijani citizens, living near the border, have traditionally engaged in heavy cross-border trade. For months after the Rose Revolution, tightened customs regulations led to confrontations between Azerbaijani traders and Georgian officials. In March 2004, Georgian personnel shot at the tires of buses attempting to cross the checkpoint without clearance in frustration at lengthy customs delays. The following month, a Georgian official commented that a "skirmish" on the border occurs "practically daily."<sup>64</sup> One year later, in May 2005, an estimated 200 ethnic Azerbaijani traders picketed the Red Bridge border checkpoint, even breaking windows of the customs terminal, in protest against confiscation of their goods (which they insisted customs officers had stolen). Georgian forces had to fire into the air to disperse the crowd.<sup>65</sup>

Cracking down on the smuggling of contraband goods, drugs, and weapons has also involved raids by masked policemen on Azerbaijani-populated villages. In May 2004, interior ministry troops and financial police raided two Azerbaijani-populated villages near the border, confiscating weapons, drugs, and contraband goods and arresting several residents. While resisting arrest, one resident opened (or returned) fire, wounding four Georgian officers. In response, Georgia officials temporarily closed the Red Bridge border crossing entirely, allegedly to help facilitate operations to establish "control" over the Azerbaijani-populated border territories.<sup>66</sup> Several other raids followed, extending into 2005. Such incidents admittedly took on "an ethnic hue," one senior interior ministry official acknowledged.<sup>67</sup> Still, by the end of 2005, Georgia had weathered any major confrontations with its Azerbaijani population, whether due to the latter's general acceptance of government measures or lack of capacity to organize effective resistance.

In addition to potential conflict between Georgian state forces and ethnic Azerbaijani villagers, the potential for conflict at the Azerbaijani border conceivably extends to the interstate realm. Azerbaijani print and television media regularly covered the conflicts between Georgian personnel and ethnic Azerbaijani villagers, expressing indignation and occasionally outrage. Georgia would like to see the Azerbaijani-controlled Red Bridge market closed but has not received Azerbaijan's consent. One border guard asserted that the market benefits powerful Azerbaijani "clans."<sup>68</sup> With Georgian authorities barred by interstate "agreement" from exerting jurisdiction over the market for more than a decade (see note 43), Georgia's only options are to render the market unprofitable, pressure Azerbaijan to close it, or forcibly occupy the market and shut it down. To date, Georgia has been working on the first option and tentatively taken steps toward the

second. More determined action has been avoided for fear of provoking an incident with Azerbaijan directly, or via the local ethnic Azerbaijani community.

Measures to tighten controls over cross-border trade have also strained relations with Georgia's minority Armenian community living near the Armenian border. In December 2005, Armenian villagers in the southern Javakheti region reportedly stormed a local checkpoint where Georgian customs officials from outside the region had replaced ethnic Armenian officials, tightening controls over the cross-border traffic many in the region depend upon for survival.<sup>69</sup>

### *Armed Forces and Police vs. Border Protection*

A third trade-off regards the choice of security forces to invest in, reform, and/or modernize. Since the Rose Revolution, Georgia has directed its efforts in the security sector mainly within the police and armed forces.

The department of border protection, nominally subordinated to the interior ministry, has expressed frustration at this lack of balance. A development strategy paper the department released in April 2005 included a series of graphs comparing staff size, budgetary outlays, and capital investments in the defense ministry, interior ministry, and border protection department.<sup>70</sup> One comparative measure derived from these graphs—the budget-to-staff ratio—vastly favored the two ministries. In 2004, the defense ministry and interior ministry received a budget of, respectively, 6,108 lari (\$3,366) and 4,048 lari (\$2,231) per employee, compared to 1,659 lari (\$914) per employee for the border protection department. In 2005, those ratios stood at, respectively, 7,219 lari (\$3,978), 7,841 lari (\$4,321), and 2,909 lari (\$1,603).<sup>71</sup> As the head of the Batumi border protection office put it: "I understand that defense has priority because we lost our territories. . .but a republic [should] start with a strong border."<sup>72</sup>

One speculation regarding the Georgian government's relative lack of interest in investing in border guards involves a rational calculation regarding foreign donors' own commitment to border security. Because external actors, especially the United States, have taken such an interest in border security in Georgia and have provided generous funding, the government may presume it can depend on foreign assistance to continue footing the bill.

As noted, however, U.S. assistance for Georgia's border security has been unnaturally high, in comparison with U.S. export control and border security programs in the rest of the former Soviet states and elsewhere. The challenge that faces foreign donors is to maintain border security assistance at appropriate levels while persuading the Georgian government that it must invest significantly more resources into border protection. Ceasing U.S. fuel assistance, a decision the Coast Guard reacted to with understanding if not without concern, is one way the United States has tried to communicate to Tbilisi that it must take a greater share of responsibility for its own border security.<sup>73</sup>

### *Striking a Balance*

Georgia, like other states in post-Soviet Eurasia and elsewhere, must balance the requirements of adequate border security with other interests of state and society such

as increasing revenues, facilitating commerce, avoiding ethnic conflict, and investing in military and police reform. Finding the right balance requires at a minimum: (1) significant investment in monitoring capabilities that incorporate the need to promote efficient commerce, (2) clear direction—cognizant of these trade-offs—from external parties (including the United States) regarding acceptable standards of border protection, and (3) government recognition that border protection should not take a backseat to army and police reform. At the same time, where outside parties push for a shift in financial and political resources to border security, they should be prepared to offer strategies and rationales for alleviating state concerns in other spheres.

### **Bureaucratic Inertia and Politics**

Reformist governments in Eurasia are not immune to the effects of bureaucratic inertia and politics, which can inhibit the construction of state institutions, including effective border security regimes. Border guards in post-Soviet states have traditionally served a military function and institutionally are poorly equipped to engage in the kind of law enforcement and investigation necessary for confronting new transborder threats. The Georgian government has formally accepted the need to alter the culture and training of the border guards (except in the case of the Russian–Georgian sector of the border, which is still considered a military frontier), and the United States and European states are keen to promote this transition. By the spring of 2005 plans were already well advanced to train border guard personnel to take on civilian police functions.

In April 2005, however, a senior interior ministry official indicated that this transition away from military functions was still “being debated.” The month before, Bitsadze noted that a lack of training was not the only problem: Thanks to limited financing, the department still had to rely in part on conscripted soldiers.<sup>74</sup> In any event, the deputy chair of the border protection department in charge of policy and administration, Eka Gigauri, reported that in the best-case scenario, it will still take at least six or seven years before the border protection department is able to become a civilian, law-enforcement institution. It is “impossible,” she said, “to make all these people policemen overnight.”<sup>75</sup>

Bureaucratic rivalries also pose an obstacle to developing a strong border security regime. The institutional division of customs and border protection might not be a problem if the departments smoothly coordinated their activities (something U.S. experience suggests is difficult even under superior circumstances). However, interviews with officials repeatedly revealed a lack of coordination as well as institutional competition between customs and border protection departments (as well as between the border protection department and its “parent” interior ministry), hindering the establishment of an effective border security regime.

First, the division of labor between customs and border protection officials in practice was still being worked out in the spring of 2005. The border protection department clearly took a back seat to customs, even in some of its own spheres of responsibility. In theory, the border guards are responsible for intercepting suspected criminals, as well as weapons, drugs, stolen vehicles, and other illicit goods. The customs

department, as its head specified, is responsible for fiscal policy at the border and the interception of solely economic contraband.<sup>76</sup>

In practice, however, some of the border guards' responsibilities were taken on by customs officers. When describing the border guards' responsibilities, the head of the customs department noted that "naturally we have [their] function as well," ferreting out drugs, arms, and other illicit items. Another senior customs official put it even more strongly, insisting that border guards only "check individuals" and have "absolutely no connection to goods." If customs officials find something illegal, he said, they have their own "connections" in the interior ministry and report to them directly.<sup>77</sup> Even Bitsadze explained that it is the exclusive "prerogative of customs officers to stop contraband and reveal its type and quantity," and that the border guards have this duty only at locations "where customs officers are not deployed."<sup>78</sup> According to an unofficial January 2005 strategy paper authored by senior officials of the border protection department, this division of labor "considerably restricts" the ability of Georgia to control the import and export of dual-use goods, presumably because customs officers are not trained to identify items that could be used in the production of illicit weaponry.<sup>79</sup>

In the regions, officials in both departments also asserted the dominance of customs officers. A senior West Customs official asserted that "99 percent of drugs are investigated by us, not others," while his superior complained that customs officials are being required to do the work of the border guards and insisted that if there was "such a high risk" of transborder crime, "the border guards should be more responsible for checking people," noting that it was "easier" for them to control the entry and exit of suspects.<sup>80</sup>

Not surprisingly, border guards saw the situation differently. The head of the border protection office in Batumi lamented that the border guards "do not have a right to search cargos if we do not have information" regarding a particular cargo. He noted that customs officials "are obligated" to ask the border guards to investigate "if they see some irregularities. But if they don't ask us to come, [the border guards] don't have a right." Furthermore, as he delicately put it, the border guards don't "peep into customs' business [and] are not present if there is a 'negotiation.'" When asked about customs officials' desire for border guards to take the lead in searching for illicit materials, he responded, "Please ask customs: How can border guards see [anything] if [customs] have priority?" At Red Bridge, the head of the local border guards confirmed that they "don't have a right to check bags [without cause] and are always blamed if [someone has] a problem with customs" (i.e., if they are held up at the border unnecessarily). "Everyone knows," he said, "that we operate on preliminary information" alone. The deputy head of customs at Red Bridge also admitted that cooperation between the two departments "could be closer."<sup>81</sup>

Interestingly, regional border guard heads in both Batumi and Red Bridge suggested that Georgia's system would be better if border protection and customs departments were unified in a single department, as they have been in the United States in the post-9/11 reorganization.<sup>82</sup> If they do not unite, much progress certainly has to be made to make their cooperation both efficient for commerce and productive for enforcing border security, as well as to give the border protection department, as an institution, the authority necessary to do its job right.<sup>83</sup>

One troubling explanation for the limited stature of the border protection department lies in high-level political infighting. The head of the border protection department, appointed after the Rose Revolution, is Bitsadze, a former military prosecutor and the spouse of the parliamentary chairwoman Nino Burjanadze, who, together with Mikheil Saakashvili and the late Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, spearheaded the street movement that led to the Rose Revolution. One government official familiar with the operations of the border protection department alleged that Bitsadze, a representative of the old *nomenklatura*, is himself corrupt and doing a poor job reforming the border protection department. Because he is Burjanadze's spouse, however, he is "untouchable." Consequently, the interior ministry is intentionally withholding funds from the border guards, operating on the theory that "the weaker the [department] is, the better," as Bitsadze will eventually be forced to resign his position.<sup>84</sup>

An alternative theory exists, however, which turns this argument on its head. This is that Bitsadze is a "good guy" and that he and, by extension, the border protection department are being "punished" since he is married to Burjanadze, who, despite her role in the Rose Revolution, has been politically sidelined and is not a member of the government's "inner circle," in contrast with Defense Minister Irakly Okruashvili and Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili.<sup>85</sup>

It is difficult to assess, from the information gathered, which, if either, of these arguments is valid. An alternative explanation is that Bitsadze is not personally corrupt but simply lacks the capacity to reform the department and, for political reasons, cannot be removed. Whatever the cause, the fact that Georgia's border protection department has been intentionally "starved" in lieu of a change in leadership has undeniably done damage to the country's border security.

### **Uncontrolled Territories: The Grey Zones**

Finally, breakaway territories in Eurasia, which do not recognize central authority and are not accountable to international law, including Transdniestria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, remain attractive avenues for transborder crime, as well as sites where the movement of terrorists and the trafficking of WMD-related materials could, in theory, go undetected.<sup>86</sup> These grey zones exist without formal customs or security regimes on their borders, either with neighboring states or with their parent states.

The "war on smuggling," which Georgia launched in 2004 after the Rose Revolution, reduced smuggling through these regions, but border security concerns have not been eliminated. As the war on smuggling led to low-level armed conflict with South Ossetia in the summer of 2004, it even temporarily exacerbated them. In general, this conflict pointed out Georgia's vulnerability to a variation of the trade-off discussed above: The desire to maintain vigilance in monitoring traffic across Abkhazian and South Ossetian borders risks increasing ethnic tensions to the possible point of war. Without a political resolution in sight, and sobered by an accidental slide to armed conflict, Georgia's willingness to monitor traffic strictly at the Abkhazian sea border and the South Ossetian–Georgian border remains tempered, not only by the physical difficulties of doing so, but also by a desire not to let relations with these territories drastically degenerate. Either solutions to

the conflicts should be found, or territories, neighboring states, and parent states must be convinced to permit vastly improved local border security regimes in their absence.

### *Grey Zones and Cross-Border Crime*

Prior to the 2003 Rose Revolution, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were major routes for the movement of various kinds of contraband. This contraband mainly involved trade in routine goods (such as untaxed fuel, cigarettes, flour, and wheat, as well as illegal timber and stolen cars), but also drugs and, to some extent, arms. Overall, fuel appears to have been the main product illegally transported through Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>87</sup> Even so, the share of illegal fuel that passed through these regions was estimated to make up less than 20 percent of the total illegal fuel trade in Georgia, as illegal fuel mainly entered Georgia from Azerbaijan and Poti on the Black Sea coast. Illegal trade in flour, another major commodity smuggled through Georgia, did, however, pass mainly through South Ossetia. Ships coming in and out of Abkhazia mainly exported illegal cargos of fish, scrap metal, and timber and imported fuel, industrial goods, wheat, and flour.<sup>88</sup>

Trade in contraband enriched not only (and, in many cases, not even primarily) Abkhazian and South Ossetian “state” budgets. Local clans, including officials, relatives or associates outside of government, and criminals, also benefited. So did parallel Georgian clans, including a guerilla group that was claiming to fight the Abkhazians while trading with them, as well as members of police and security organs. Foreign companies—mainly Russian and (in Abkhazia) Turkish—also benefited. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, illegal trade, at least in South Ossetia, benefited a large number of local traders and buyers, Ossetian and Georgian alike, as well as merchants and consumers from outside the region.

In addition to economic contraband, drug trade through the two regions has also been noted by Georgian officials. According to a 2003 study by the American University Transnational Crime and Corruption Center’s Georgia office, Georgian officials said that inhabitants of the breakaway regions smuggled locally produced drugs to southern Russia for consumption, and even alleged that Russian military forces had transported drugs from Central Asia to the former Russian Black Sea military base in Gudauta, in northern Abkhazia (still in operation as a “peacekeeping” station) and on to Europe.<sup>89</sup> They also indicated some drug trafficking (but among groups of ethnic Georgian kin) across the Abkhazian border into the neighboring Georgian region of Mingrelia, but noted that most of the drugs that ended up in Mingrelia came from other areas of Georgia.

Finally, they reported heroin flows from South Ossetia, although no more than half as much as that which came into Georgia through Azerbaijan and the Russian region of Dagestan. Indeed, in 2003, Abkhazian and South Ossetian leaders themselves publicly lamented the growth in their regions of drug production and distribution—mainly of marijuana, hashish, and opium.

Anecdotal evidence on illegal weapons transit via South Ossetia and Abkhazia abounds. In addition to machine guns, pistols, grenades, and ammunition, past reports indicate the transportation of anti-tank rocket launchers (via South Ossetia) and bomb launchers (via Abkhazia). Prior to the Rose Revolution, this trade included sales not only by Russian peacekeepers, but by Georgian peacekeepers and policemen as well. Georgian

criminals also purchased arms in the breakaway regions via illegal networks. Weapons smuggling across the Abkhazian–Georgian border appears to have been a less serious problem than smuggling across the South Ossetian border. Arms transiting Abkhazia were mainly smuggled in the other direction, into Russia.<sup>90</sup>

Concerns have also been raised about the possible trafficking of radioactive materials from or through Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nonproliferation specialists have long cited the possible disappearance of up to two kilograms of highly enriched uranium from the Vekua Physics and Technology Institute in Sukhumi, Abkhazia, sometime between the 1992–93 war and 1997, when a team from Russia’s ministry of atomic energy gained access to the site and did not find any uranium.<sup>91</sup> Abkhazian officials have repeatedly denied claims that the institute has housed any highly enriched uranium, at least not since the early 1950s.<sup>92</sup> In anticipation of the visit of an IAEA team to Georgia in June 2005, however, the director of the institute emphasized that other radioactive materials were present at the site and needed to be housed more securely.<sup>93</sup>

No confirmed incidents of trafficking in any of these, or other, radioactive materials from or through the breakaway regions have been reported. However, Abkhazia, thanks to lax maritime and land border control, would seem to be a convenient site for radioactive materials trafficking, either of local sources or others smuggled in from Russia.

South Ossetia’s alleged role in radioactive materials trafficking is mainly as a transit route for materials smuggled to or from Russia.<sup>94</sup> In July 2004, the Georgian ministry of environmental protection and natural resources, which houses the nuclear and radiation safety service, alleged that radioactive waste from Russia was being stored in the region for profit, in a deserted zinc mine. South Ossetian authorities denied the accusations.<sup>95</sup>

### *Improvements and Challenges for Grey Zone Border Security*

Georgia’s efforts to combat smuggling since the Rose Revolution have reduced the amount of goods that transit illegally across the de facto borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In the former, this occurred mainly with the shutting down of black market operations in the Ergneti market at the South Ossetian border and the establishment of Georgian financial police checkpoints in and around South Ossetian territory. In both areas, the war on smuggling also drastically reduced (if perhaps not eliminated entirely) the network of separatists, Georgian paramilitaries (on the Abkhazian border), and Georgian state officials complicit in sustaining illegal trade across the borders. Georgia’s effort to disband armed gangs of compatriots claiming to defend Georgian interests in Abkhazia, who in the meantime engaged in a profitable smuggling trade with the Abkhazians, was especially successful. In general, by October 2004, large-scale, if not petty, smuggling had been reduced significantly.<sup>96</sup>

That said, Georgia’s anti-smuggling efforts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia are imperfect. First, while the level of smuggling via South Ossetia has been reduced considerably, geography makes it impossible in practice to transform the South Ossetian border into a firmly monitored de facto state border. The administrative border rambles across numerous mountain valleys and lowlands. Short of utilizing “an entire army” for border monitoring (as one interviewee put it) or a West Bank-like fence, South Ossetia will

remain a highly porous region in which goods and people can enter and exit freely via the Roki tunnel at the South Ossetian–Russian border and enter and exit other areas of Georgia via a number of bypass roads, built up as fast as Georgian authorities destroy them.<sup>97</sup>

In addition, Georgian efforts to crack down on contraband in South Ossetia in the summer of 2004 triggered a “defensive” reaction that increased the transborder passage of arms and armed men from Russia. During the summer, a large quantity of weaponry, including anti-tank rocket launchers and unguided helicopter missiles, was intercepted by Georgian troops, and South Ossetian officials openly advertised the arrival of “armed volunteers” from the North Caucasus and elsewhere. While the Georgians and South Ossetians had, by the end of 2004, begun a limited process of disarmament in the conflict zone itself, their agreement did not apply to the northern part of South Ossetia, the Java region, which international observers also do not monitor. The extent of weaponry or armed individuals that have been in this region in the past is not well known. The Java region remains a “grey zone within a grey zone” over which oversight would be ideal.

By late 2004, the Georgian government began to ease up on its fight against smuggling in South Ossetia. The Ergneti market was allowed to partially re-open, and other smaller markets also emerged. There are several reasons for this relaxation. The first was that for the Georgians to try to clamp down effectively on all contraband meant maintaining a high risk of conflict with South Ossetia.

The second reason stemmed from the acknowledgement that revenues from contraband were not as important for propping up the South Ossetian leadership as the Georgian government had earlier claimed (its underlying aim for the anti-smuggling campaign in the region was to help bring down the leadership). The breakaway region’s authorities had sufficient financial support from Russian power ministries and Ossetian businessmen in Russia.<sup>98</sup>

Third was the recognition that closing the Ergneti market harmed the economic interests of both Ossetian and Georgian petty traders, and that permitting trade to renew might alleviate local tensions.<sup>99</sup> All this also meant, however, that security controls within and across South Ossetia once again loosened.

This relaxation, in turn, renewed concerns that Georgian officials would once again be complicit in the smuggling of goods through South Ossetia. In March 2005, the ministry of internal affairs, with the explicit support of President Saakashvili, purged all police departments in the Shida Kartli region, which formally includes South Ossetia, of senior officers because of the involvement of regional police in smuggling. This became the basis for a brief political scandal, as one opposition political party accused the governor of Shida Kartli and Defense Minister (and former interior minister) Irakly Okruashvili of patronizing these official contraband networks. While these claims were never supported, in September 2005 Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili admitted that police officers deployed in the South Ossetian conflict zone were continuing to take bribes from smugglers and that they would be replaced.<sup>100</sup>

A final concern regarding South Ossetia’s porous borders was brought to light in the summer of 2005. In July, the Georgian ministry of internal affairs orchestrated a raid into South Ossetia to arrest three individuals they claimed were part of a group that had been organized by a representative (or former representative) of the Russian General Staff’s

Main Intelligence Administration (GRU) to carry out acts of sabotage and terrorism in Georgia. Interior Minister Merabishvili claimed that this group was behind a car bomb that killed three policemen in the city of Gori in February 2005, as well as another three attacks on infrastructure sites in 2004. While the Russians and South Ossetians rejected Georgia's claims, such transit of armed individuals will continue to remain a possibility as long as the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict remains unresolved.<sup>101</sup>

With regard to Abkhazia, maritime border security concerns continue to exist. For a time, the Georgian Coast Guard's financial interest in levying fines on ships corresponded with the government's interest to enforce its ban on ships traveling to Abkhazia without Georgia's permission. After tensions mounted in August 2004, however, Tbilisi did not push the Coast Guard to maintain a high level of interceptions. While politically wise, this did deprive the Coast Guard of a significant source of revenue and renewed trafficking concerns, as cargo and individuals could again enter and exit Abkhazia without inspection.<sup>102</sup>

In the summer of 2005, Georgia stepped up its efforts to enforce the ban against unauthorized sea traffic to Abkhazia, seizing two Turkish ships. While Tbilisi offered to deliver the contents to Abkhazia as a sign of goodwill, the Georgian border protection department emphasized that ships violating Georgia's borders would continue to be detained.<sup>103</sup> It can be anticipated, however, that pressures not to exacerbate tensions, combined with technical limitations, will continue to limit Georgia's ability to apprehend ships going to and from the breakaway region. While the Coast Guard detained on average 10 to 11 ships a year between 1999 and 2004, the Georgian intelligence department estimated in 2003 that three to five ships were passing through Abkhazian ports *per week*.<sup>104</sup>

Abkhazia also raises other transnational criminal concerns. A Russian decision in September 2004 to restore rail transport to Abkhazia—illegal from Georgia's perspective—provides the opportunity for even greater amounts of illicit cargo to transit to the breakaway region. Given this increased ease of access to Abkhazia, and the tightening of land and sea checkpoints at other Georgian borders, there will be an even greater incentive for those who seek to smuggle goods or people out of the Caucasus to do so via Abkhazia. Efforts to smuggle illegal goods across the *de facto* Abkhazian–Georgian border also continue; in August 2005, Georgian police detained a Russian peacekeepers' vehicle that, according to the minister of internal affairs in Tbilisi, was carrying contraband alcohol and 13,000 packs of cigarettes.<sup>105</sup>

Finally, although a newly elected Abkhazian leadership declared its own “war on corruption” in 2005 (leading, evidently, to two assassination attempts on Abkhazia's *de facto* prime minister), the use of Abkhazia as a territory within which to engage in transnational crime should not be ignored. In July 2003, the Georgian Coast Guard intercepted a Turkish ship carrying an estimated 25,000 blank Russian passports into Abkhazia, a one-time shipment excessive if intended for use solely for the already questionable purpose of formally granting Abkhazian residents Russian citizenship; fake identification documents for employees of Russian security organs have also been found in the region.<sup>106</sup> In addition, Abkhazia remains an obvious candidate for money laundering, with its unregulated tourism and real estate industries.

The renewal of trade relations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia (and, for the latter, a permanent easing of ship interceptions) could contribute to an increase in goodwill that might, in turn, contribute to conflict resolution in the future. If so, however, it will be desirable to increase security and transparency directly at the Russian–Abkhazian and Russian–South Ossetian borders. Otherwise, the trade-off between easing interethnic tensions and building adequate border security in the grey zones will remain.

*The Grey Zones: Limiting the Rhetoric of International Terrorism*

Unexpectedly, Georgian ministers and other government officials, interviewed in October 2004, evinced relatively little concern that Abkhazia and South Ossetia were or could become sites for the proliferation and transit of WMD-related materials or havens for international terrorist activity. In interviews, officials repeatedly highlighted arms and drug peddling as concerns, but mainly as examples of the linkages of local elites to members of Russia's power ministries or to petty criminal groups, not of putative links to terrorists.<sup>107</sup>

Longstanding concerns about the safety of nuclear materials in Abkhazia were, however, raised. One senior Georgian official familiar with the situation in the breakaway republic asserted that scientific institutes in the region were selling radioactive materials in Turkey. "We know," he said, "but just have to prove it." He also noted the existence of a Wahhabi-funded mosque in multid denominational Abkhazia, although he emphasized that this did not imply the presence of Islamic extremism in the region.<sup>108</sup>

This relative lack of concern regarding the threat of breakaway regions to international security is striking, if only because Georgia's official position regarding the dangers of seceded statelets is much more extreme. In a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2004, President Saakashvili embraced a doctrine enunciated by some foreign observers, as well as the U.S. Department of State, that "uncontrolled zones breed crime, drug trafficking, arms trading and most notably, terrorism."<sup>109</sup> He intimated that "these smugglers' safe havens" can "affect European security as long as they remain unresolved" and explicitly equated the September 2004 terrorist attack against an elementary school in Beslan, North Ossetia, with the existence of the breakaway regions, noting that "all lawless zones can be sanctuaries for criminals that conduct acts of terror."<sup>110</sup> He called for Georgian-Russian cooperation to "forever do away with the Basayevs of the world [a reference to a Chechen terrorist leader] . . . no matter what side of the border they terrorize."

Clearly, to garner international support, Georgia wishes to prove that the breakaway regions pose a threat to international security. News items and survey studies, in addition to voluminous anecdotal information, point to the existence of narcotics and arms smuggling, as well as the illegal transfer of weaponry from Russia directly to South Ossetian authorities. A senior Georgian diplomat, in fact, lamented in October 2004 that while illegal arms and drugs were a serious problem in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Tbilisi needed to publicize this more thoroughly; the authorities had yet to do a proper job compiling and distributing evidence of the structure and extent of such activity.<sup>111</sup> The difficulty in acquiring government data on these issues can be attributed to disorganization and lack of coordination among ministries more than to an absence of evidence.

The reluctance of Georgian government officials to link conventional weapons and drug trafficking to WMD-related materials trafficking or terrorist activity, however, can be attributed to two other factors. The first, and most obvious, is a lack of evidence that such links are anything but theoretical at this point. Also, though, Georgia is caught between two strategies for conflict resolution. On the one hand, it seeks to provide the United States and the European Union with a stake in resolving the conflicts, something that the voicing of credible concerns about terrorism and WMD proliferation can help bring about. On the other hand, Georgia wishes to extend an olive branch to Abkhazians and South Ossetians in order to garner their peaceful agreement to reunification. It is difficult, however, to simultaneously associate these two peoples with the “terrorists” and “killers” confronting Russia, as Saakashvili did in his September 2004 speech, and convince these groups that Georgians perceive them as brethren and respectable citizens.

Two Georgian officials later intimated that the president’s public approach at the United Nations was perhaps not the most productive way to promote conflict resolution.<sup>112</sup> Still, this somewhat contradictory strategy of seeking to get external parties vested in the conflict resolution process while encouraging the breakaway regions voluntarily to adopt positions more to Georgia’s liking can be expected to continue into the foreseeable future.

## Conclusion

Georgia, like other post-Soviet Eurasian states coping with the establishment of secure border regimes, still has far to go, even given the promise of the November 2003 Rose Revolution. Border security reform has begun at a low starting point, with limited financing, equipment, and expertise. Attention to border security competes with other state-building imperatives, including the promotion of commerce, ethnic stability, and other security organs. In addition, bureaucratic inertia and politics continue to interfere with border security reform. Lastly, the existence of breakaway regions in Georgia poses a constant challenge to border security—at least until regional authorities, Tbilisi, and Russia can all be persuaded to institute a more secure de facto border regime, whether in conjunction with, or in the absence of, permanent political solutions to conflict. In Georgia, as elsewhere, regime change is the starting point for institutional change, not its culmination.

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## NOTES

1. See, for example, Lyudmila Zaitseva, “Illicit Trafficking in the Southern Tier and Turkey since 1999: A Shift from Europe?” *Nonproliferation Review* 9 (Fall–Winter 2002), pp. 172–74; and Svante E. Cornell, “The Growing Threat of Transnational Crime,” in Dov Lynch, ed.,

- The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU*, Chaillot Papers No. 65, EU Institute for Security Studies, Dec. 2003, pp. 23–39.
2. For background on border security issues related to past militant transit and the drug trade in the Pankisi Gorge, see Irakli Chikhladze, "Traffic Control," *IWPR Reports*, CRS No. 95, Aug. 24, 2001, <[www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net)>; Glenn E. Curtis, "Involvement of Russian Organized Syndicates, Criminal Elements in the Military, and Regional Terrorist Groups: Narcotics Trafficking in Central Asia, Caucasus, and Chechnya," Federal Research Division, Library of Congress (Oct. 2002), pp. 3–7; Tracey C. German, "The Pankisi Gorge: Georgia's Achilles' Heel in Its Relations with Russia?" *Central Asian Survey* 23 (March 2004), pp. 27–39; and Cory Welt, "Shaking Up the System: Georgia and the War on Terror," in Daniel Benjamin, ed., *America and the World in the Age of Terror: A New Landscape in International Relations* (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2005), pp. 28–52.
  3. See, for example, Roger N. McDermott, "Border Security in Tajikistan: Countering the Narcotics Trade?" (Surrey, UK: Conflict Studies Research Centre, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Oct. 2002); Sergey Golunov, "Border Security in Central Asia: Before and After September 11," in Anja H. Ebnother, Ernst M. Felberbauer, and Martin Malek, eds., *Facing the Terrorist Challenge: Central Asia's Role in Regional and International Cooperation* (Vienna: Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2005); and Alfred Appai and Peter Skorsch, "Report of the EC Rapid Reaction Mechanism Assessment Mission to Central Asia, Border Management" (European Commission Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management Unit, June 2002), <[http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/cpcm/rrm/cabm02.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/cpcm/rrm/cabm02.pdf)>. Also see Nicole J. Jackson, "The Trafficking of Narcotics, Arms and Humans in post-Soviet Central Asia: (Mis)Perceptions, Policies and Realities," *Central Asian Survey* 24 (March 2005), pp. 39–52.
  4. These cases have involved Georgian and Armenian citizens. In addition to these seven documented cases, an Azerbaijani citizen arrested in 2000 in North Ossetia, Russia, for involvement in a uranium smuggling operation had allegedly transported a small sample of uranium via Georgia to potential buyers in Turkey. Three earlier cases of trafficking of radioactive materials in Turkey, in 1993, 1996, and 1997, also allegedly involved Georgian citizens in the transit of radioactive materials from Georgia. Officials also arrested a suspect in Tbilisi in 2003, allegedly intending to transport cesium, strontium, and mustard gas to the main railway station. On these cases, see Tamara C. Robinson, "Nonproliferation Approaches in the Caucasus," *Nonproliferation Review* 5 (Winter 1998), pp. 109–10; Zaitseva, "Illicit Trafficking in the Southern Tier and Turkey," pp. 172–74; Joby Warrick, "Smugglers Enticed by Dirty Bomb Components," *Washington Post*, Nov. 30, 2003; and "Radioactive Material Seized on Georgian-Armenian Border," Caucasus Press News Agency (Tbilisi), March 13, 2004.
  5. By 2004, some 233 radioactive sources had been found on Georgian territory. See Georgi Nabakhtiani, "Review of Nuclear and Radiation Safety in Georgia," *NIS Export Control Observer* (July 2004), pp. 13–20. Also see, for example, Robinson, "Nonproliferation Approaches in the Caucasus"; Joby Warrick, "Hunting a Deadly Soviet Legacy: Concerns About 'Dirty Bomb' Drive Efforts to Find Radioactive Cesium," *Washington Post*, Nov. 11, 2002; and William C. Potter and Elena Sokova, "Illicit Nuclear Trafficking in the NIS: What's New? What's True?" *Nonproliferation Review* 9 (Summer 2002), p. 118.

6. From 2002 to 2004, the budget for GBSLE assistance totaled \$49.1 million; for EXBS assistance to other post-Soviet states, \$118.8 million; and for EXBS assistance to all other states, \$82.6 million; author's calculations, based on the U.S. State Dept. Annual Reports on U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia, FY 2002–2004, and Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY 2004–2006. Totals for post-Soviet states except Georgia include all forms of EXBS assistance reported in the State Dept. Annual Reports, plus the NADR-EXBS sums for Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia reported in the Congressional Budget Justifications. Totals for other states equal the NADR-EXBS sums reported for 2002–2004 in the Congressional Budget Justifications.
7. Of the main border crossings, this leaves for further exploration the single formal Russian–Georgian border crossing at Zemo Larsi (other Russian–Georgian traffic passes through South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and the Georgian–Armenian border.
8. Data from an official strategy paper, "A conceptual framework for the development of the Georgian MIA Dept. of State Border Protection," Dept. of State Border Protection, 2005.
9. The number of employees at the border protection department dipped below 6,000 in 2005. The 2005 official strategy paper notes that the border protection department had 5,700 employees by April 2005, reduced by 3,500 thanks to recent reforms (although an appended chart, evidently produced earlier in the year, notes that the department staff had 6,710 employees, down from 8,568 in 2003). In Dec. 2004, the chair of the border protection Dept. noted that 2,000 employees had already been fired, including 60 percent of the central staff's employees, and in March 2005, he said that 3,500 had been removed. In Nov. 2005, the Georgian parliament passed a bill setting the number of border guards in 2006 at 5,868. Eka Gigauri, Deputy Chairwoman in Charge of Policy and Administration, Dept. of Border Protection, and a U.S. government advisor (name withheld by request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, April 2005; "Conceptual framework," Dept. of State Border Protection; *Sakartvelos respublika* (Tbilisi), Dec. 9, 2004; *Rezonansi* (Tbilisi), March 19, 2005; "Georgia Plans to Increase Armed Forces," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, Nov. 8, 2005, <www.civil.ge >.
10. *Sakartvelos respublika*, Dec. 9, 2004.
11. Senior Ministry of Internal Affairs official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
12. Dept. of Border Protection official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Batumi, April 2005.
13. In response to a U.S. proposal to mount a second short-range radar in a vessel to detect more distant movement, a senior Coast Guard official referred back to the Coast Guard's need to conserve its limited supply of fuel. Senior Coast Guard official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Poti, April 2005.
14. The Poti railway detector had just been installed, with the nearby operating room literally under construction, when I visited. The detector at Sarpi had been installed, officials said, a year and a half ago. Dept. of Customs and Border Protection officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Poti and Sarpi, April 2005.
15. See Zaitseva, "Illicit Trafficking in the Southern Tier and Turkey since 1999," p. 173; and Warrick, "Smugglers Enticed by Dirty Bomb Components."

16. United States General Accounting Office (GAO), "Nuclear Nonproliferation: U.S. Efforts to Help Other Countries Combat Nuclear Smuggling Need Strengthened Coordination and Planning," Report GAO-02-426, May 2002, p. 5, <[www.gao.gov/new.items/d02426.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02426.pdf)>.
17. This finding repeats the cautionary note of three years ago by the GAO on the lack of effectiveness of some portal monitors the United States had donated to Eurasian states. Their report observed that "some countries lack even the basic infrastructure to operate and maintain portal monitors, such as a source of electricity." *Ibid.*, p. 13.
18. They also noted with some frustration that the radiation detector monitoring inbound traffic issued alarms even on loads of bananas and textiles. The 2002 GAO report also observed that the donated radiation detectors identified radioactive materials "in commodities that are sources of naturally occurring radiation such as fertilizer." Dept. of Border Protection officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Sarpi, April 2005; GAO, "Nuclear Nonproliferation," p. 5.
19. Dept. of Border Protection official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Batumi, April 2005.
20. U.S. government advisor (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
21. Dept. of Border Protection officials and senior ministry of internal affairs official (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Sarpi, Red Bridge, Tbilisi, April 2005. In fact, of Georgia's 21 border checkpoints as of Jan. 2005 (by the spring, the government anticipated closing three checkpoints on the Georgian–Azerbaijani border due to an absence of activity), only nine were equipped with computers at all, according to an unofficial strategy paper authored by senior officials of the border protection Dept.. Temuri Shengelia and Ramazi Papidze, "Georgian Border Management Past, Present and Future," Jan. 2005, Public Policy Knowledge Project, Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative, Canadian International Development Agency.
22. "MIA Department of Georgian State Border Defense" (Tbilisi, 2005), p. 23.
23. See the annual reports of the U.S. Dept. of State, "U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia," FY 1998–2004. The 2005 budget is in the survey of activities of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations for the week of May 9, 2005, <[wwwc.house.gov/international\\_relations/survey.htm](http://wwwc.house.gov/international_relations/survey.htm)>.
24. For annual budgets and descriptions of assistance provided, refer to "U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia," FY 1998–2004.
25. Depts. of Border Protection and Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, Poti, Batumi, Sarpi, Red Bridge, April 2005.
26. Zurab Antelidze, chairman, Dept. of Customs, interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
27. *Georgian Economic Trends Quarterly Review* (Tbilisi: Georgian-European Policy and Legal Advice Center, 2005), no. 1: 30, <[www.geplac.org](http://www.geplac.org)>.
28. Interfax News Agency (Moscow), March 24, 2004.
29. Imedi TV (Tbilisi), March 22, 2004, Oct. 8, 2004; Rustavi-2 TV (Tbilisi), Oct. 11, 2004, all trans. in BBC Monitoring.
30. Dept. of Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Batumi, April 2005.

31. "Crackdown at Sarpi Customs Checkpoint," *The Messenger* (Tbilisi), Oct. 24, 2005; "24 customs officers arrested," *Civil.Ge, United Nations Association of Georgia Online Magazine*, Dec. 9, 2005. <[www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)>.
32. Dept. of Customs official and senior Ministry of Internal Affairs official (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Red Bridge, Tbilisi, April 2005.
33. The incident led to a purge of the entire staff of the Red Bridge customs office. The head of the customs Dept. later explained that "even the suspicion that these people were involved in illegal acts is enough to dismiss them." Subsequently, 21 of the fired customs officers filed a court claim against the head of the customs dept., insisting that they had been fired illegally. "Customs Dismisses Staff at Red Bridge," *The Messenger*, April 19, 2005; "Fired Customs Department Staff Brings Case Against Zurab Antelidze," <[www.humanrights.ge/eng/news636.shtml](http://www.humanrights.ge/eng/news636.shtml)>.
34. "After Sting, Customs Agents Arrested," *The Messenger*, Nov. 24, 2005.
35. U.S. government advisor and senior Ministry of Internal Affairs official (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
36. *Rezonansi*, March 19, 2005.
37. In an interview, deputy chairwoman Eka Gigauri indicated that the minimum wage for border guards had recently increased, to 150 lari (\$82), but she also noted that superior pay grades would not be set much higher. "Conceptual framework," Dept. of State Border Protection, and Eka Gigauri, interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
38. "Conceptual framework," Dept. of State Border Protection; Eka Gigauri and a U.S. government advisor (name withheld by request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
39. Dept. of Border Protection official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Batumi, April 2005.
40. Dept. of Border Protection official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Red Bridge, April 2005.
41. "MIA Department of State Border Defense"; *Rezonansi*, March 19, 2005.
42. Senior Coast Guard official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Poti, April 2005. In March, the chairman of the border protection dept. noted that they had collected 245,000 lari. *Rezonansi*, March 19, 2005.
43. Presumably, there is a supplementary Georgian border check of vehicles using this side road. The origins of this anomaly were explained by a local border guard. He said that during the Georgian civil war in 1992, Azerbaijani forces occupied the marketplace and procured an agreement from Georgian authorities to "lease" the territory of the market for 25 years, a deal that has remained uncontested now for 14 years. Dept. of Border Protection official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Red Bridge, April 2005.
44. This problem also existed before the Rose Revolution. See "Red Bridge: Bent mirror of the Georgian economy," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, Aug. 13, 2003.
45. Dept. of Border Protection officials and senior Ministry of Internal Affairs official (names withheld by request), Red Bridge, Tbilisi, April 2005.
46. Dept. of Border Protection official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Red Bridge, April 2005.

47. For an overview of drug usage in Georgia prior to the Rose Revolution, see "Drug Situation in Georgia 2003 Annual Report," Programme of Assistance for the Prevention of Drug Abuse and Drug Trafficking in the South Caucasus (SCAD Programme), United Nations Development Program, <[www.scadgeorgia.org](http://www.scadgeorgia.org)>. Also see Jean-Christophe Peuch, "South Caucasus: Region Growing as Hub for International Drug Trafficking," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 9, 2004.
48. Dept. of Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, Batumi, Sarpi, Red Bridge, April 2005. For South Ossetia, see below. On the drug trade in the Pankisi Gorge, see Chikhladze, "Traffic Control"; Curtis, "Involvement of Russian Organized Syndicates, Criminal Elements in the Military, and Regional Terrorist Groups"; German, "The Pankisi Gorge"; and Welt, "Shaking Up the System."
49. Dept. of Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, Batumi, Red Bridge, April 2005. In spring 2005, the Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed that Subutex, obtained cheaply and legally in Western Europe, had come to account for "between 60 and 70 percent" of drug abuse in Georgia. Rustavi-2 TV, May 16, 2005, trans. in BBC Monitoring.
50. Dept. of Customs officials (name withheld by request), interview by author, Poti, Red Bridge, April 2005. Other sources provide additional information on the arrival of illegal drugs into the South Caucasus. In 2004, a report on drug use in Azerbaijan noted that in addition to domestically produced marijuana, illegal drugs mainly enter Azerbaijan from Iran (primarily opium). Additionally, the UN-mandated International Narcotics Control Board has called attention to the role of Turkmenistan, across the Caspian Sea from Azerbaijan (and connected by land via Iran), as a central avenue of drug transit from Afghanistan. "National Report on the State of the Drugs Problem in Azerbaijan 2004," SCAD, United Nations Development Programme, Baku, 2004; and "Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2004," International Narcotics Control Board, <[www.incb.org](http://www.incb.org)>. Also see IWPR and Gulnara Mamedzade, "Baku Struggling to Curb Drugs Trade," *IWPR Reports*, CRS No. 105, Nov. 14, 2001; and Cornell, "The Growing Threat of Transnational Crime," pp. 28–35.
51. Senior Dept. of Customs official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005. Before the Rose Revolution, the Red Bridge border crossing was acknowledged by the Georgian government as a major entry point, together with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for illegal narcotics into Georgia. "Red Bridge: Bent Mirror of the Georgian Economy," Aug. 13, 2003.
52. Depts. of Border Protection and Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, Batumi, April 2005. Official figures provided by West Customs do reflect a low amount of confiscated drugs from Jan.–Oct. 2004: five instances, in which a total of 353 grams of heroin and 4 kilograms (kg) of opium were confiscated. In 2003, before the Rose Revolution, official statistics for the entire country recorded low, but greater, amounts of confiscated drugs overall: 3 kg of heroin and 8.4 kg of opium, as well as 42.4 kg of marijuana (to compare, in 2003 Azerbaijani statistics report an official confiscation of 1.6 kg of heroin [and 15.7 kg in 2004], 79.8 kg of opium, and 125.1 kg of marijuana). Assuming that the overall level of confiscated drugs in 2004 in Georgia at least did not decrease, the data from West Customs for that year indicates

that its share of confiscations was relatively low. Unfortunately, this does not constitute evidence regarding the relative share of drug trafficking across various borders (just apprehensions), nor the total amount of drugs illegally crossing the border. See “Drug Situation in Georgia 2003 Annual Report,” and “National Report on the State of the Drugs Problem in Azerbaijan 2004.”

53. Depts. of Border Protection and Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Batumi, Red Bridge, April 2005.
54. Depts. of Border Protection and Customs officials (names withheld by request), interview by author, Red Bridge, April 2005.
55. Depts. of Border Control and Customs officials (names withheld by request), interview by author, Batumi, April 2005.
56. U.S. government advisor (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
57. Dept. of Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, Poti, Batumi, Sarpi, Red Bridge, April 2005. One 2003 report noted that over the previous half-decade the number of trucks transiting Georgia eastward (i.e., to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan) had been significantly reduced thanks to increased transit fees and corruption. Turkish vehicles traveling to Kazakhstan, in particular, were transiting instead through Iran. “Red Bridge: Bent Mirror of the Georgian Economy,” Aug. 13, 2003.
58. Dept. of Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, Batumi, Sarpi, April 2005.
59. International Narcotics Strategy Report 2005, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, U.S. Dept. of State, <[www.state.gov/g/inl](http://www.state.gov/g/inl)>.
60. Dept. of Border Protection official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Batumi, April 2005.
61. Dept. of Customs officials (names withheld by request,) interviews by author, Tbilisi, Sarpi, April 2005.
62. Senior Dept. of Customs official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
63. “MIA Department of Georgian State Border Defense,” p. 23.
64. ANS TV (Baku), March 7, 2004; *Ekho* (Baku), April 14, 2004, trans. in BBC Monitoring.
65. *525ci qazet* (Baku), May 17, 2005, <[www.525ci.com](http://www.525ci.com)>; Azad Azarbaycan TV (Baku), May 16, 2005, trans. in BBC Monitoring.
66. *Zerkalo* (Baku), June 1, 2004; Rustavi-2 TV, May 30, 2004, trans. in BBC Monitoring. Also see Jean-Christophe Peuch, “Government Closes Border Checkpoint with Azerbaijan, Sends Police Reinforcements to South Ossetia,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 31, 2004.
67. Senior Ministry of Internal Affairs official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
68. Dept. of Border Protection official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Red Bridge, April 2005.
69. “Samtskhe-Javakheti Residents Raided Customs Houses at the Armenian-Georgian Border,” Regnum News Agency, Dec. 12, 2005, <[www.regnum.ru](http://www.regnum.ru)>.
70. “Conceptual framework,” Dept. of State Border Protection.

71. Ibid. The figure of 2,909 lari per employee is calculated on the basis of 6,710 employees in 2005. If the alternative number of employees cited by the border protection dept. is used (5,700), the spending per employee in 2005 would total 3,421 lari (\$1,880), still considerably less than elsewhere in the security sector.
72. Dept. of Border Protection official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Batumi, April 2005. Bitsadze has also complained about the imbalance among security organs. *Sakartvelos respublika*, Dec. 9, 2004.
73. *Rezonansi*, March 19, 2005; senior Coast Guard official and a U.S. government advisor (names withheld by request), Poti, Tbilisi, April 2005.
74. Senior Ministry of Internal Affairs official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005; *Sakartvelos respublika*, March 19, 2005.
75. Eka Gigauri, interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
76. Zurab Antelidze, interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
77. Zurab Antelidze and a senior Dept. of Customs official (name withheld upon request), interviews by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
78. *Sakartvelos respublika*, Dec. 9, 2005.
79. Shengelia and Papidze, "Georgian Border Management Past, Present and Future."
80. Dept. of Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Batumi, April 2005.
81. Dept. of Border Protection and Customs officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Batumi, Red Bridge, April 2005.
82. Dept. of Border Protection officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Batumi, Red Bridge, April 2005.
83. The problem of coordination reaches beyond the border protection and customs departments. A third organ—the Financial Police, an autonomous branch of the Ministry of Finance—has prominently figured in crackdowns on smuggling within the country, both in villages near the border and elsewhere. While the financial police have been accused of corruption and heavy-handed tactics, they have been backed by high-level government authorities and have appeared to exert influence on the operations of the customs dept.. From the perspective of the border guards, the main problem is not this fact, however, but simply that in Georgia there are "dozens of structures to take care of the same things." Border Protection Dept. official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Red Bridge, April 2005; "Chief of Financial Police Accused of Illegal Deals," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, April 4, 2004; "Alleged Wrongdoing Sparks Controversy over Financial Police," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, Aug. 16, 2004; and "Financial Police Grilled by MPs over High-Handed Tactics," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, June 17, 2004.
84. Senior Georgian government official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
85. U.S. government advisor (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, April 2005.
86. I list these four regions in the ranking they are usually placed in terms of border security concerns: Transdnistria, posing the largest concern (in large part, since it is the closest to Europe), followed by South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and, finally, Nagorno-Karabakh, where

- border security concerns—in spite of multiple Azerbaijani accusations regarding transborder crime and the region's proximity to Iran—have remained limited. For more on Transdniestria, and claims that Soviet-era rockets with radioactive warheads have gone missing from the region, see Joby Warrick, "Dirty Bomb Warheads Disappear; Stocks of Soviet-Era Arms For Sale on Black Market," *Washington Post*, Dec. 7, 2003; Eugen Tomiuc, "Transdniestria: Missing Missiles Raising Fears of 'Dirty Bombs' for Sale," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Dec. 10, 2003; Brian Johnson Thomas and Mark Franchetti, "Radioactive Rockets 'For Sale' in Breakaway Soviet Republic," *The Times* (London), May 8, 2005; and "'Dirty Bomb' Rockets Again Reported for Sale in Transnistria," *NIS Export Control Observer* (June 2005), pp. 18–20. Also see, however, Ahto Lobjakas, "Western Diplomats Say Reports of Smuggling From Transdniestria Likely Exaggerated," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Oct. 11, 2005.
87. The discussion in this section is drawn mainly from Alexandre Kukhianidze, Alexandre Kupatadze, and Roman Gotsiridze, *Smuggling Through Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region of Georgia* (Tbilisi: American University's Transnational Crime and Corruption Center Georgia Office, 2004). Also see Chikhladze, "Traffic Control"; Irakli Chikhladze, "South Ossetia: Single Market Economy," *IWPR Reports*, CRS No. 108, Dec. 5, 2001; Roman Gotsiridze, "Economic and Social Consequences of Internal Conflicts," Parliament Budget Office of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2003, <www.pbo.ge >; Alexander Kukhianidze, "Organized Crime and Smuggling Through Abkhazia and South Ossetia," in Sami Nevala and Kauko Aromaa, eds., *Organized Crime, Trafficking, Drugs: Selected Papers Presented at the Annual Conference of the European Society of Criminology, Helsinki 2003* (Helsinki: European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, 2004), pp. 87–101; and Theresa Freese, "A Report from the Field: Georgia's War Against Contraband and Its Struggle for Territorial Integrity," *SAIS Review* 25 (Winter–Spring 2005), pp. 107–21.
  88. See Kukhianidze, et al., *Smuggling Through Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region of Georgia*, p. 17.
  89. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–36, on this and subsequent statements in these two paragraphs.
  90. *Ibid.*, pp. 32–34. In addition to the above, other illegal cross-border activity in or via Abkhazia and South Ossetia has also been reported. In July 2004, Georgian media reported on the escape of four Turkish citizens who, interviewed on television, said they had been tricked into forced labor in Abkhazia and had left 22 others behind. In July, a female suspect from Tbilisi was detained on the Gori–Tskhinvali highway with \$350,000 in counterfeit U.S. currency. In Dec. 2005, Georgian forces arrested a South Ossetian police officer, who Defense Minister Irakly Okruashvili claimed was a member of a counterfeiting crime ring based in South Ossetia. Rustavi-2 TV, July 6, 2004, trans. in BBC Monitoring; "Georgian Police Seize \$350,000 Dollars' Worth of Counterfeit U.S. Currency," Prime News News Agency (Tbilisi), July 21, 2005; "Defense Minister Okruashvili Speaks of S. Ossetia Shootout," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, Dec. 5, 2005.
  91. See Potter and Sokova, "Illicit Nuclear Trafficking in the NIS," p. 118; "Bomb Material Missing; Is Equipment Gone, Too?" Associated Press, June 26, 2002.
  92. Douglas Birch, "High Radioactivity and Low Security: Scattered Across Remains of U.S.S.R. Are Materials to Make 'Dirty Bombs,'" *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 14, 2004; Tom Parfitt, "The

- Nuclear Nightmare," *The Times*, March 3, 2004; "Abkhazia Ready to Receive IAEA Inspectors," Interfax News Agency, June 16, 2005.
93. "IAEA 'Sluggish' on Building Waste Facility in Abkhazia," Interfax News Agency, June 16, 2005.
  94. For example, a smuggling ring that was arrested in Batumi in 2001 allegedly acquired uranium in the Georgian city of Gori, just south of South Ossetia. "1.8 kg Uranium Seized in Batumi, Georgia," NIS Nuclear Trafficking Database, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, July 24, 2001.
  95. *Akhali versia* (Tbilisi), July 4, 2004; *Akhali versia*, Aug. 29, 2004; Interfax news agency, July 6, 2004.
  96. Senior Georgian government officials (names withheld by request) and Alexandre Kupatadze, associate research fellow, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center Georgia Office, interviews by author, Tbilisi, Oct. 2004.
  97. Ibid.
  98. Senior Georgian government officials (names withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, Oct. 2004; *Akhali versia*, Aug. 29, 2004.
  99. See Freese, "Georgia's War against Contraband"; Theresa Freese, "Georgian Defense Minister Distances Himself from Corruption Scandal," *Eurasia Insight*, March 17, 2005, <www.eurasianet.org>; *Rezonansi*, April 2, 2005; *Sakartvelos respublika*, April 2, 2005.
  100. "Opposition New Rights Speak of Smuggling in Shida Kartli," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, April 1, 2005; "MIA Purges Police, Removes Checkpoints in Shida Kartli," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, Sept. 24, 2005.
  101. See Theresa Freese, "A Georgian War on Terrorism?" *Eurasia Insight*, Aug. 2, 2005, <www.eurasianet.org>.
  102. Intriguingly, however, a senior Coast Guard official attributed a reduction in the interception of ships not to political reasons, but to the fact that the Coast Guard's 120-mile-range radar station (referred to above) had ceased to function. Senior Coast Guard official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Poti, April 2005.
  103. "Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia," June 28, 2005, <www.mfa.gov.ge>; "Georgian Coast Guard Continues to Detain Ships Along the Shores of Abkhazia," Regnum Information Agency, July 15, 2005, <www.regnum.ru>.
  104. "MIA Department of Georgian State Border Defense," p. 14; Kukhianidze, et al., *Smuggling Through Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region of Georgia*, p. 17.
  105. "Russian Peacekeepers Accused of Smuggling in Abkhazia, South Ossetia," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, Aug. 12, 2005.
  106. "Georgian authorities find 25,000 blank Russian passports on Turkish ship," Associated Press, July 9, 2003; Alexandre Kupatadze, interview by author, Tbilisi, Oct. 2004.
  107. Typical of respondents, one senior official in the ministry of defense acknowledged straightforwardly that drug and arms trafficking through South Ossetia was a minor part of the broader problem of "routine" contraband through the breakaway region. Senior Ministry of Defense official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, Oct. 2004.
  108. Senior Georgian government official (name withheld by request), interview by author, Tbilisi, Oct. 2004.

109. The quotation is from Ronald D. Asmus and Bruce P. Jackson, "The Black Sea and the Frontiers of Freedom," *Policy Review*, no. 125 (June–July 2004).
110. "Saakashvili's Speech at UN General Assembly," *Civil.Ge United Nations Association of Georgia Magazine*, Sept. 22, 2004. Georgian officials have also claimed that some of the terrorists that attacked the elementary school in Beslan, North Ossetia, in Sept. 2004 were given free passage through the region as they informed local security authorities they were volunteers heading to South Ossetia to defend against Georgian incursions. Senior National Security Council and Ministry of Defense officials (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Washington, DC, Tbilisi, Oct. 2004.
111. Senior Georgian diplomat (name withheld by request), interview by author, Washington, DC, Oct. 2004.
112. Senior Georgian diplomat and official (names withheld by request), interviews by author, Washington, DC, Tbilisi, Oct. 2004.

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