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Freedom in the World 2011 - South Ossetia

Capital: N/A

Population: 70,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

South Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity faced criticism in 2010 from both Moscow and residents of Tskhinvali, the territory's capital, due to the slow pace of reconstruction and accusations of corruption since the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia. In April, Kokoity loyalists charged Moscow-backed South Ossetian prime minister Vadim Brovtsev with embezzlement, leading Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin to intervene and defend Brovtsev in late May. Meanwhile, Russia continued to strengthen its grip on the territory throughout the year.

South Ossetia first declared its independence from Georgia in 1920, igniting a war that left thousands dead. Both Georgia and South Ossetia were incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922, with South Ossetia designated an autonomous *oblast* (region) within Georgia.

As Georgian nationalism grew toward the end of the Soviet era, a South Ossetian independence movement demanded in 1989 that the oblast be upgraded to a republic, a move that was rejected by the Georgian government. South Ossetia declared full independence from Georgia in 1990, prompting Tbilisi to abolish its autonomous status. Fierce fighting broke out in January 1991, resulting in a thousand deaths and civilian displacement on both sides; some 40,000 to 100,000 Ossetians fled to North Ossetia in Soviet Russia. In March 1991, a reported 99 percent of South Ossetian referendum voters endorsed independence, and 90 percent voted in favor of seeking to join Russia in a January 1992 referendum, after the final dissolution of the Soviet Union. Both plebiscites were rejected by Tbilisi.

In June 1992, a ceasefire agreement established a Russian-led peacekeeping force, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was put in charge of monitoring the ceasefire and facilitating negotiations on a permanent resolution of the conflict.

Torez Kulumbegov led separatist South Ossetia from 1992 to 1993. He was succeeded by Lyudvig Chibirov, who went on to win the newly created post of president in 1996. After

a period of relatively cordial relations with Tbilisi, the 2001 election of hard-liner Eduard Kokoity as president of South Ossetia renewed tensions. His Unity Party took the majority of seats in 2004 parliamentary elections; though four seats were reserved for the territory's ethnic Georgian population, only five Georgian villages were able to vote. All of the separatist regime's elections went unrecognized by Georgia and the international community.

In May 2004, recently elected Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili ordered a campaign to dismantle the multimillion-dollar smuggling operation controlled by Kokoity's regime, triggering skirmishes and causing Ossetians to rally around Kokoity. By August 19, the two sides had agreed to a ceasefire, and in September Saakashvili offered a proposal for expanded South Ossetian autonomy, which was rejected by Tskhinvali.

South Ossetia held a joint referendum and presidential election in November 2006, with 99.8 percent of voters on Ossetian-controlled territory reaffirming the bid for independence, according to Tskhinvali. Kokoity, who faced no genuine opposition, was reelected with a reported 98.1 percent of the vote. On the same day, Tbilisi organized a similarly lopsided election and referendum in South Ossetia's Georgian-controlled areas, but the resulting pro-Georgian government was never able to draw significant support away from separatist institutions.

Following weeks of skirmishes along the border, Tbilisi launched an attack on Tskhinvali on August 7, 2008. Russia immediately retaliated by sending troops into South Ossetia, pushing back Georgian forces. Russia then expanded the zone of conflict by invading Georgia via Abkhazia – another breakaway Georgian territory in the northwest – and by blocking Georgian ports and bombing Georgian towns from the air.

Both sides had signed a French-brokered ceasefire pact by August 16, and Russia eventually withdrew its troops to the confines of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, separatist forces retained portions of the territories that were previously controlled by Tbilisi. Moscow, defying international criticism, formally recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states on August 26 and subsequently concluded bilateral security agreements with the separatist governments.

Russia continued to tighten its grip on South Ossetia during 2009. In addition to the construction of new Russian military facilities in the territory, an agreement signed between Moscow and Tskhinvali in April established a formal and permanent role for the Russian border guards who had patrolled the de facto border since 2008.

In May 2009, South Ossetia held parliamentary elections that resulted in a legislature dominated by Kokoity loyalists. The victory came amid accusations that Kokoity had shut out and threatened opposition parties.

Despite infusions of Russian aid, the postwar reconstruction process remained painfully slow in 2009 and 2010, and many Ossetians accused Kokoity of embezzlement. In December 2009, Russian officials released a report finding that only a fraction of the aid to Tskhinvali had been used for its intended purposes.

Tskhinvali residents and unpaid workers mounted several protests over the reconstruction issue in 2010. In response to the growing criticism, officials loyal to Kokoity brought criminal embezzlement charges in April against South Ossetian prime minister Vadim Brovtsev, a Russian businessman who had allegedly been selected for the post by Moscow to oversee the reconstruction funds. A series of tit-for-tat accusations between the two factions raised concerns of a major political crisis, and in late May, Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin intervened, reportedly pressuring Kokoity to end his campaign against Brovtsev. In August, Russian prosecutors opened 11 of their own criminal embezzlement investigations. In addition to its political interests, Russia had a strong incentive to protect the territory's finances, as it reportedly supplied 98 percent of South Ossetia's budget.

As of the end of 2010, only Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru had joined Russia in recognizing the independence of South Ossetia.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Under the separatist constitution, the president and the 33-seat parliament are elected for five-year terms. South Ossetian elections are not monitored by independent observers or recognized by the international community. Most ethnic Georgians have either declined to or been unable to participate in such elections. During the May 2009 parliamentary elections, opposition parties reported significant violations, including mishandling of ballot boxes, restrictions on observer access to polling stations, and alleged coercion of voters in favor of President Eduard Kokoity's supporters. Opposition representation in the new parliament was also reduced as a result of election laws enacted in 2008, which set a 7 percent vote threshold for parties to enter the parliament and required all lawmakers to be elected by proportional representation.

Russia exerts a dominant influence on South Ossetian politics, and its degree of control increased substantially after the 2008 war. In October 2008, Kokoity dismissed his cabinet and replaced most ministers with officials from Russia. Russian businessman Vadim Brovtsev was appointed as prime minister in August 2009, reportedly under pressure from Moscow, and Russian intervention in May 2010 apparently thwarted Kokoity's alleged attempts to oust him.

In July 2010, Colonel Valery Yakhnovets, a Russian officer, was appointed as South Ossetia's defense minister, becoming the fifth consecutive Russian military officer to hold the post. At the time of his appointment, the South Ossetian armed forces consisted of about 1,250 men, having been reduced by some 1,000 since the spring.

Corruption is believed to be extensive. In 2010, Kokoity's administration faced pressure from Russia and the public to curb the alleged embezzlement of funds earmarked for postwar reconstruction. Before the war, the territory reportedly hosted extensive smuggling and black-market activities, including the counterfeiting of U.S. currency.

South Ossetia's electronic and print media are entirely controlled by separatist authorities, and private broadcasts are prohibited. However, power struggles between Kokoity loyalists and Moscow appears to have provided an opportunity for some journalists to publicly criticize Kokoity on such issues as corruption. In June 2010, South Ossetian opposition journalist Fatima Margiyeva received a suspended two-year prison sentence for illegal weapons possession in a case that was widely seen as retaliation for her critical reporting on Kokoity. In July, Timur Tskhovrebov, editor of the independent newspaper *21st Century*, was attacked by 10 assailants, allegedly including three members of the South Ossetian parliament, after he signed a joint appeal with Georgian activists calling for improvements in the humanitarian situation in the territory.

The South Ossetian Orthodox Church, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Church and which the Georgian and Russian Orthodox Churches do not recognize, continues to operate freely, according to the religious monitoring group Forum 18. While the majority of the population is Orthodox, there is a sizeable Muslim community, many members of which migrated from the North Caucasus. The educational system reflects government views, and many South Ossetians receive higher education in Russia.

While antigovernment protests were extremely rare before the 2008 war, opposition groups mounted demonstrations following the flawed 2009 elections, and Tskhinvali residents protested repeatedly in 2009 and 2010 in response to the slow construction of new homes and charges of government corruption. Several nongovernmental organizations operate in South Ossetia, but at least one that claims to be independent has been linked to the government, and all organizations operate under the close scrutiny of the authorities.

South Ossetia's criminal code adheres to the Soviet Georgian and 1996 Russian models. The justice system has been manipulated to punish perceived opponents of the separatist leadership, while government allies allegedly violate the law with relative impunity. It was unclear in 2010 whether Russian prosecutors' steps to curb malfeasance would be effective, as the Russian court system itself remains deeply flawed.

Indiscriminate attacks by both sides in the 2008 war killed and displaced civilians, and Ossetian forces seized or razed property in previously Georgian-controlled villages. According to an August 2010 Amnesty International report, about 26,000 people, most of

them ethnic Georgians, remained displaced from their homes in and around South Ossetia.

South Ossetian authorities have barred ethnic Georgians from returning to the territory unless they renounce their Georgian citizenship and accept Russian passports. A UN envoy reported in August 2009 that South Ossetia's tiny remaining ethnic Georgian population had complained of being pressured to accept Russian passports and vote in the May parliamentary elections under threat of expulsion. In September 2010, Kokoity announced plans to issue new passports, birth certificates, and other documents to all residents of South Ossetia by June 2011. Russian authorities have prevented ethnic Ossetians from entering Georgia, but travel to Russia is unimpeded.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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