



Freedom in the World 2017 - South Ossetia

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Freedom Status: Not Free

Aggregate Score: 11 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 6.5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 7 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 6 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 50,000

OVERVIEW

Large parts of South Ossetia, a breakaway territory of Georgia, enjoyed de facto independence after a civil conflict ended in 1992. A 2008 war that drew in Russian forces resulted in the expulsion of the remaining Georgian government presence and of many ethnic Georgian civilians. Only Russia and a handful of other states have since recognized South Ossetia's independence. The territory remains almost entirely dependent on Russia, and Moscow exerts a decisive influence over politics and governance. Local media are largely controlled by the authorities, who also restrict or closely monitor civil society activity. The judiciary is subject to political influence and manipulation. Physical abuse and poor conditions are reportedly common in prisons and detention centers.

Key Developments in 2016:

- The president announced in May that a referendum on joining the Russian Federation would not be held until after the next presidential election in 2017.
- Ten polling stations were opened across the territory to allow the many residents with Russian citizenship to vote in Russia's parliamentary elections in September, drawing objections from the Georgian government.
- In October, leaked e-mails suggested that Russian officials carefully managed the legislative process in South Ossetia, adding to perceptions of extensive control by Moscow.

Executive Summary:

With a presidential election scheduled for April 2017, South Ossetia's political leaders clashed during 2016 over how to approach the goal of union with Russia. In May, President Leonid Tibilov, an independent, postponed a planned referendum on the issue until after the upcoming election. He favored a plebiscite on whether to amend the constitution to empower the president to request incorporation into the Russian Federation, effectively giving the leadership – and by implication Moscow – greater discretion on when to formally seek annexation. His political rival, parliament speaker Anatoliy Bibilov of the United Ossetia party, advocated an outright poll on whether to unite with Russia.

A third possible contender, former president Eduard Kokoity, announced plans to seek reelection to his old post in November. However, according to electoral laws, candidates must have permanently resided in South Ossetia for 10 years. Kokoity had lived in Russia since leaving office in 2011, meaning he could be disqualified.

The territory's government remained heavily dependent on Russian aid, which made up more than 90 percent of its budget for 2016. A leak of e-mails apparently tied to senior Kremlin adviser Vladislav Surkov in October shed further light on the extent of Russian involvement. According to the documents, Moscow carefully managed the drafting and adoption of legislation by the South Ossetian parliament.

The local authorities continued to impose restrictions on critical journalists and media outlets during the year. In October, the chief prosecutor's office banned two websites for slandering government officials and brought criminal charges against two journalists and an internet user on similar grounds.

In February, South Ossetian security officials began requiring civilians to apply for permission before visiting villages along the boundary with Georgian-controlled territory. The tighter restrictions met with opposition from local residents, who organized a small protest in July.

Explanatory Note:

This territory report has been abridged for *Freedom in the World 2017*. For background information on political rights and civil liberties in South Ossetia, see [Freedom in the World 2016](#).

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