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Freedom in the World 2010 - South Ossetia (Georgia)

Capital:

Population: 70,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow ↓

South Ossetia received a downward trend arrow due to Russia's increased control over the economy and political system, and Russian aid that has fueled rampant corruption among local elites.

Overview

Russia tightened its grip on South Ossetia in 2009, formalizing the presence of Russian border guards in the territory and constructing a new military base in Tskhinvali. Russian president Dmitri Medvedev pledged additional funds for South Ossetia in July, but reconstruction efforts have been painfully slow and mired in corruption. Meanwhile, a series of incidents in the summer increased the threat of new fighting with Georgia, and the more than 18,500 ethnic Georgians who fled South Ossetia during the 2008 war remained unable to return during 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. The Ossetians exercised modest control over the territory during the Soviet period, and Georgian-South Ossetian relations were marked by relative peace and stability.

In 1989, a South Ossetian independence movement, responding in part to growing nationalism within Georgia, demanded 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, then part of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. 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, the Sochi Agreement – a ceasefire pact signed by Tbilisi, Moscow, and Tskhinvali – established a Russian-led peacekeeping force with Georgian and Ossetian components and created the Joint Control Commission (JCC), a negotiating framework co-chaired by Georgia, Russia, and both North and South Ossetia. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was put in charge of monitoring the ceasefire and facilitating negotiations.

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. Though relations with Tbilisi were calm and often cordial for the rest of the 1990s, 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. Georgian Interior Ministry troops moved in and forcibly shut down the Ergneti Market, a major trading post and smuggling center. Skirmishes soon escalated, with dozens of people killed in August amid fears of all-out war. Ossetians, many of whom depended on the market for their livelihood, rallied around Kokoity. By August 19, the sides had agreed to a ceasefire, and in September Saakashvili offered a proposal for expanded 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 parallel election and referendum for South Ossetia's Georgian-controlled areas. Dmitry Sanakoyev, an ethnic Ossetian and South Ossetia's former defense minister, won the presidency with the support of about 96 percent of the 57,000 participating voters, according to the electoral commission established for the poll. A reported 94 percent voted in favor of a proposal calling for South Ossetia to form a federation with Georgia. Neither the separatist nor the Tbilisi-backed election was monitored by international organizations. Sanakoyev's parallel government was established in 2007, but it was never able to draw significant support away from Kokoity.

Following weeks of skirmishes along the border in 2008, Tbilisi launched an attack on Tskhinvali on August 7. Russia immediately retaliated by sending tanks and ground 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.

Both sides had signed a French-brokered ceasefire deal by August 16, and Russia eventually withdrew its troops to the confines of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, they did not immediately return to prewar positions as called for by the ceasefire, and for several months continued to hold 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.

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.

The OSCE, which had monitored the conflict for 17 years, ended its mission in June after Russia refused to extend its mandate unless the organization recognized the

independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The OSCE was replaced by European Union (EU) monitors, though they could only operate on the Georgian side of the de facto border.

An exhaustive EU report released in September faulted both Tbilisi and Moscow for instigating the war, and accused both sides of violating international law. The report found that Tbilisi had initiated the assault on South Ossetia, which Georgian officials denied.

In the summer of 2009, Georgia accused Russian troops of attempting to take additional Georgian territory, and each side accused the other of kidnapping and cross-border shelling, stirring fears of a new outbreak of war.

By year's end, Russia had significantly tightened its grip on South Ossetia. 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. Moscow also constructed a new military base in Tskhinvali, and discussed the establishment of an additional base in the town of Akhalgori which had been controlled by Tbilisi until the 2008 war.

Russian president Dmitri Medvedev made a surprise visit to South Ossetia in July, promising additional reconstruction aid. Yet despite the influx of funds from Moscow, the rebuilding remained painfully slow, with many Ossetians accusing Kokoity of embezzlement. In December, Russian officials released a report finding that only a fraction of the aid to Tskhinvali had been used for its intended purposes.

As of the end of 2009, only Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru had joined Russia in recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Though South Ossetia conducts elections, they are not monitored or recognized by independent observers. 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 government violations, including sealed ballot boxes, observers being given limited access to polling stations, and residents allegedly being forced to vote for Eduard Kokoity. Election laws enacted in 2008 set a 7 percent vote threshold for parties to enter the parliament and required all lawmakers to be elected by proportional representation; the rules helped to substantially decrease opposition representation in 2009.

Under the separatist constitution, the president and the 33-seat parliament are elected for five-year terms. In October 2008, President Kokoity dismissed his cabinet and replaced most ministers with officials from Russia, allegedly under pressure from Moscow. In August 2009 Kokoity appointed a Russian businessman, Vadim Brovtsev, as prime minister.

Corruption is believed to be extensive, particularly in the reconstruction effort, though South Ossetia was not listed separately on Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index. The territory has been linked to 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. Russia's top-selling newspaper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, claimed to have launched a weekly publication for South Ossetia in 2009. Tskhinvali also operates an English- and Russian-language website.

The South Ossetian Orthodox Church, which the Georgian and Russian Orthodox

Churches do not recognize, continues to operate freely, according to the religious monitoring group Forum 18.

The educational system reflects government views, and many South Ossetians receive higher education in Russia.

There were two protests in Tskhinvali in 2009: one in June by the opposition following the May parliamentary elections, and an unsanctioned demonstration in September by Tskhinvali residents complaining of the slow construction of new homes. Though several nongovernmental organizations operate in South Ossetia, at least one that claims to be independent has been linked to the government, and all organizations operate under close scrutiny from Tskhinvali.

South Ossetia's criminal code adheres to the Soviet Georgian and 1996 Russian models. Though the death penalty exists in law, South Ossetia has maintained an unofficial moratorium on executions since 1996.

Indiscriminate attacks by both sides in the 2008 war killed and displaced civilians, and Ossetian forces seized or razed property in Georgian-controlled villages. According to UN data cited by Amnesty International, about 30,000 people, most of them ethnic Georgians, remained displaced from their homes in and around South Ossetia as of May 2009, and 18,500 from South Ossetia faced long-term displacement. The majority of the displaced in Georgian-controlled territory have been housed in rapidly constructed developments provided by the Georgian government. Nearly all of the estimated 38,500 people who fled to Russia during the war are said to have returned to South Ossetia.

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.

Russian authorities have barred ethnic Ossetians from entering Georgia, but they can travel freely into Russia.

As Russia increased its economic control over the territory in 2009, local elites also siphoned funds earmarked for rehabilitation projects, including construction.

**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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