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2015 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6.5

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7

OVERVIEW

In June 2014, South Ossetia held parliamentary elections, which were conducted peacefully and without major procedural violations. A number of newly formed opposition parties were able to participate in the election, with candidates competing for 34 legislative seats. United Ossetia, led by emergency minister and former presidential contender Anatoliy Bibilov, captured 20 of the 34 seats.

Leonid Tibilov's presidential term continued amid a period of relative stability in 2014. Tibilov continued to voice support for strengthening the territory's ties with the Russian government, which already exerts almost complete control over South Ossetia.

At the end of 2014, only Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and the Pacific Island state of Nauru recognized South Ossetia's independence from Georgia. Tuvalu retracted its recognition in March after signing an agreement to establish diplomatic relations with Georgia.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 1 / 40 (+4)

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12 (+2)

Under the South Ossetian constitution, the president and the 34-seat parliament are elected for five-year terms. Elections held by the separatist government are not monitored by independent observers or recognized by the international community, and most ethnic Georgians have either declined or been unable to participate in elections since separatist forces first seized territory in the early 1990s and expanded their control in the 2008 conflict.

Presidential elections held in November 2011 were declared invalid by the Supreme Court amid questionable claims of electoral violations. Second-round polls had shown Alla Dzhioyeva, a former education minister who opposed Russian annexation, to be the winner. A new election was called for March 2012 amid protests by Dzhioyeva's supporters, with Dzhioyeva herself barred from running. Four new candidates, all favorable to Russia, competed in the repeat election. Tibilov, who had led South Ossetia's Committee for State Security (KGB) in the 1990s, received 42 percent of the vote, followed by human rights ombudsman David Sanakoyev with approximately 25 percent. Tibilov won the April 8 runoff with 54 percent and was sworn in as president on April 19.

The parliamentary elections held in June 2014 were a substantial improvement from previous elections. Unlike in the 2009 parliamentary vote, in which only 3 parties were able to participate, candidates from 9 parties succeeded in registering for the 2014 election. The opposition United Ossetia won 20 seats, followed by the Unity of the People party with 6 seats. The People's Party and Nykhas each captured 4 seats. Tibilov did not openly support any party, and the election was noted for its lack of major violations.

The election campaign, which began in May, was also considered an improvement from previous years. No political party was arbitrarily barred from participating, and of the several individuals who had been denied registration because of alleged failure to meet the five-year residency requirement, the majority had their candidacy reinstated after appealing to the Supreme Court.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16 (+2)

In keeping with his campaign pledge of national unity, Tibilov included members of the opposition into his government. Sanakoyev took the post of foreign minister, Dzhioyeva became deputy prime minister, and Bibilov kept his position of emergency situations minister. Tibilov's presidency has ushered in a period of apparent political liberalization. A significant number of new political parties have been able to register in recent years. These include Bibilov's United Ossetia, which won the most seats in the 2014 election; New Ossetia, headed by Sanakoyev; and Dzhioyeva's Freedom Square party. In contrast, during the 2011 election period, leading opposition candidates had been prevented from registering, and other opposition candidates were beaten or jailed.

Tibilov has significantly increased ties with Russia, and officials endorsed by Moscow have held or maintained key government positions in recent years, many appointed directly by Russia or from Russia's North Ossetia republic. In December 2014, Tibilov proposed a draft treaty with Russia that emulated a sweeping bilateral agreement signed by Moscow and Abkhazia in November. The proposal focused on increasing economic and military cooperation.

In 2013, Russian president Vladimir Putin appointed Vladislav Surkov, the reputed architect of Russia's nominally pluralistic but tightly managed party system, as his presidential aide responsible for social and economic issues in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12

Russia continues to exert almost complete control over South Ossetia, and both Tibilov and opposition parties have spoken repeatedly of formally uniting the territory with Russia's North Ossetia republic or joining the Russian Federation directly. In January 2014, United Ossetia issued a formal appeal to Tibilov, asking the president to call for a referendum on South Ossetia's unification with Russia. Authorities declined to grant the request.

A number of recent agreements with Russia have expanded the country's influence in South Ossetia. A 2013 agreement on interparliamentary cooperation aimed to harmonize Ossetian laws

with Russian legislation; a memorandum of cooperation on antiterrorism was signed in 2013 to enhance security and border protection; and a 2011 agreement has given Russia the freedom to build and operate military bases in the territory for 49 years. Roughly 4,000 Russian troops remain stationed in South Ossetia.

Russian aid comprises almost the entirety of South Ossetia's budget, and the territory's high unemployment rate, lacking industry, and poor administrative coordination have all contributed to the difficulties of advancing economic reform.

Having pledged to root out his predecessor's allegedly rampant corruption and increase stability, Tibilov initiated an investigation in 2012 into suspected embezzlement involving former president Eduard Kokoity and the disbursal of Russian funds earmarked for postwar reconstruction; a number of allegedly corrupt officials were replaced in the process. South Ossetia's prosecutor general, Merab Chigoyev, continued pursuing dozens of criminal investigations into corruption in 2014, including some aimed at former government officials.

Discretionary Political Rights Question B: -3 / 0

During the 2008 war, Ossetian forces seized or razed property in previously Georgian-controlled villages, and large numbers of ethnic Georgians fled the fighting. Authorities in South Ossetia have since barred ethnic Georgians from returning to the territory unless they renounce their Georgian citizenship and accept Russian passports.

Civil Liberties: 9 / 60 (+1)

D. Freedom of Expression: 4 / 16

South Ossetia's local electronic and print media are almost entirely controlled by the authorities, and private broadcasts are prohibited. Foreign media, including broadcasts from Russia and Georgia, are accessible. During the 2011-12 election period, independent or opposition-oriented journalists in the territory faced various forms of intimidation, including spurious criminal charges. In April 2014, three Georgian journalists investigating a story about the territory's administrative boundary lines were detained in South Ossetia, but released the following day.

Freedom of religion has sometimes been adversely affected by the political and military situation. While the majority of the population is Orthodox Christian, 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.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 1 / 12 (+1)

While antigovernment protests were extremely rare before the 2008 war, opposition groups mounted demonstrations following the flawed 2009 elections, and Tskhinvali residents protested repeatedly over the slow postwar reconstruction process and related government corruption. In the run-up to the presidential election in 2011, one human rights activist was beaten and another threatened after leading such demonstrations.

In the run-up to the June 2014 parliamentary election, groups and individuals publicly expressed support for different political candidates and views without being subject to intimidation or arrest, in contrast to previous years. A number of assemblies were held peacefully and without undue interference.

Though some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate in the territory, in practice they are largely controlled by the state and funded by Russia. Activists operate under the close scrutiny of

the authorities and have been subject to intimidation in the past. In March 2014, the parliament amended the territory's NGO legislation to include provisions for the operation of "foreign agents," a term used to refer to organizations that receive funding from outside the territory. Following several months of debate with local NGOs opposed to the terminology, a final version of the law was passed in May, replacing the term "foreign agent" with "foreign partner." The law makes organizations with foreign funding subject to broader and more frequent reporting requirements, increasing the oversight of local authorities over NGOs. The legislation bore similarity to a law passed in Russia in 2012.

F. Rule of Law: 1 / 16

South Ossetia's justice system has been manipulated to punish perceived opponents of the separatist leadership, while government allies allegedly violate the law with relative impunity. Russian prosecutors have attempted to curb malfeasance by local officials, but the Russian court system itself remains deeply flawed.

Physical abuse and poor conditions are reportedly common in South Ossetian prisons and detention centers. Arbitrary arrests of ethnic Georgians have been reported.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 3 / 16

Freedom of movement in and out of the territory is restricted in various ways. Russian authorities have prevented ethnic Ossetians from entering Georgia, but travel to Russia is unimpeded. Russian troops also regularly arrest Georgians near the administrative border for illegal crossing. Detainees are usually released after paying a fine. A group of 17 Georgians from a district bordering South Ossetia were detained in May 2014 for crossing the administrative boundary, but released several days later.

In May 2013, Russian troops began installing wire fencing along the administrative border, dividing Georgian-controlled areas from South Ossetia and impeding previously unhindered movement between local villages on both sides. The United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) called on Russia to halt construction and adhere to its commitments under the August 2008 cease-fire agreement. Russian forces halted the installation in September 2013.

The strategic Roki Tunnel – the only route linking South Ossetia to Russia since the 2008 war – was reopened in November 2014 following four years of Russian-led reconstruction efforts.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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