



Freedom in the World 2013 - South Ossetia

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2013 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 6.5
Civil Liberties: 6
Political Rights: 7

Overview

Security forces prevented Alla Dzhioyeva, an opposition candidate who had led a November 2011 presidential election before the Supreme Court annulled the results, from proceeding with her unilateral inauguration in February 2012. A repeat election went forward in March with four new candidates, and former security chief Leonid Tibilov won the presidency with 54 percent of the vote in an April runoff. He pledged to root out his predecessor's alleged corruption and included Dzhioyeva and his runoff opponent in his cabinet. While the political crisis calmed somewhat during the year, further elite infighting and Russia's overriding influence continued to threaten the territory's stability.

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, South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia in 1990, and fighting broke out in January 1991, resulting in a thousand deaths and civilian displacement on both sides. 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 cease-fire agreement established a Russian-led peacekeeping force, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe was put in charge of monitoring the cease-fire 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. The two sides agreed to a cease-fire in August, but the separatist government in Tskhinvali rejected Saakashvili's proposal for expanded South Ossetian autonomy within Georgia in September.

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 sent troops into South Ossetia, pushing back Georgian forces. Russia also invaded Georgia via Abkhazia, another breakaway Georgian territory in the northwest. Both sides signed a French-brokered cease-fire by August 16, and Russian troops eventually withdrew to the confines of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, though separatist forces retained some territory previously controlled by Tbilisi. Despite international criticism, Moscow recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states on August 26 and subsequently concluded bilateral security agreements with the separatist governments, augmenting its long-term military presence.

In May 2009, South Ossetia held parliamentary elections that resulted in a legislature dominated by Kokoity supporters, amid accusations that the president had shut out and threatened opposition parties. Many Ossetians also accused Kokoity of embezzling Russian aid as the postwar reconstruction process dragged on in 2009 and 2010. A Russian report released in December 2009 found that only a fraction of the money had been used for its intended purposes, and Tskhinvali residents mounted several protests over the issue in 2010. Russia significantly expanded its control over the territory during 2011, and talk of annexation gained momentum.

In June 2011, the parliament rejected efforts by Kokoity supporters to lift term limits and allow him to participate in a presidential election set for November. Eleven candidates ultimately ran in the first round on November 13, including several Kokoity loyalists; six other candidates were forced or pressured to withdraw. Opposition candidate Alla Dzhioyeva, a former education minister who opposed Russian annexation, and Moscow-backed candidate Anatoly Bibilov, South Ossetia's emergency situations minister, each won about 25 percent of the vote and advanced to the November 27 runoff. Results showed Dzhioyeva as the second-round winner with nearly 57 percent, but amid questionable claims of electoral violations, the Supreme Court declared the election invalid and ordered a new vote for March 2012.

The ruling triggered protests by Dzhioyeva's supporters that continued until mid-December, when Russia brokered a compromise under which Dzhioyeva would accept the court's ruling if Kokoity stepped down immediately and the parliament fired the prosecutor general and the Supreme Court chairman. Kokoity stepped down, and Prime Minister Vadim Brovtsev became acting president. However, the parliament rejected the other conditions, prompting Dzhioyeva to announce that she would go ahead with her inauguration on February 10, 2012. On February 9, about 200 security personnel raided her headquarters and attempted to detain her. She was hospitalized after the

confrontation, with some reports saying she was struck with a rifle and the authorities maintaining that she fainted due to high blood pressure.

Four new candidates, all reportedly favorable to Russia, ran in the repeat election on March 25. Dzhioyeva was barred from running, and neither her nor Kokoity's camp succeeded in fielding a candidate. Leonid Tibilov, who had led South Ossetia's Committee for State Security (KGB) in the 1990s, received 42 percent, followed by human rights ombudsman David Sanakoyev with about 25 percent. Tibilov won the April 8 runoff with 54 percent of the vote and was sworn in as president on April 19.

Having promised during the campaign to tackle corruption and foster stability, Tibilov initiated an investigation of Kokoity's alleged embezzlement and replaced a number of reputedly corrupt officials. He also left some officials in their posts, including Bibilov. In keeping with a pledge of national unity, he appointed Sanakoyev as foreign minister and Dzhioyeva as deputy prime minister.

Despite a period of relative calm after the election, violent attacks on public officials and ongoing political battles between the new leadership and Kokoity loyalists threatened to undermine the territory's fragile stability. In July, a former state security official was seriously injured by an unidentified gunman. A week later, a member of the prosecutor's office was abducted and killed. And in September, a bomb blast struck the home of the deputy defense minister.

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 or been unable to participate in such elections.

During the May 2009 parliamentary elections, opposition parties reported significant violations, including substantial voter coercion. Opposition representation was also reduced as a result of 2008 election laws, which set a 7 percent vote threshold for parties to enter parliament and required all lawmakers to be elected by proportional representation.

The 2011 presidential election campaign featured violence and other abuses by the government of outgoing president Eduard Kokoity. The leading opposition candidates were prevented from registering due in part to a 10-year residency requirement that was added to the constitution earlier that year. Other opposition candidates were beaten or jailed, and one senior member of a disqualified candidate's party was murdered in North Ossetia in October.

Russia exerts an overriding influence on South Ossetian politics, and its degree of control increased substantially after the 2008 war. Officials reputedly endorsed by Moscow have held key government positions in recent years, and Russia was allegedly opposed to opposition candidate Alla Dzhioyeva taking office as president after the 2011 election. The parliament in 2011 signed a 49-year agreement allowing Russia to build and operate a new military base in Tskhinvali; there were already over 4,000 Russian troops stationed in the territory. In September 2012, the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia reported a buildup of Russian military forces along the administrative boundary separating South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia.

Corruption is believed to be extensive. Before the 2008 war, the territory reportedly hosted large-scale smuggling and black-market activities. Kokoity's alleged embezzlement of Russian funds earmarked for postwar reconstruction became a major issue in the 2011 and 2012 elections. After his inauguration in April 2012, President Leonid Tibilov ordered an investigation into Kokoity's alleged graft.

South Ossetia's local electronic and print media are almost entirely controlled by separatist authorities, and private broadcasts are prohibited. Foreign media, including broadcasts from Russia and Georgia, are accessible. Independent or opposition-oriented journalists in the territory face various forms of intimidation, including trumped-up criminal charges. According to opposition journalist Fatima Margiyeva, a brief period of relative press freedom during the 2012 presidential campaign was reversed under Tibilov.

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.

While antigovernment protests were extremely rare before the 2008 war, opposition groups mounted demonstrations following the flawed 2009 elections, and Tskhinvali residents have protested repeatedly in response to the slow postwar construction of new homes and alleged government corruption. In 2011, one human rights activist was beaten and another threatened after leading such demonstrations. Dzhioyeva's supporters held weeks of peaceful protests in November 2011 after the annulment of the presidential election, which Kokoity called unauthorized and threatened with violence. Civil society groups operate under the close scrutiny of the authorities, and activists are subject to intimidation.

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.

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. Authorities in South Ossetia have barred ethnic Georgians from returning to the territory unless they renounce their Georgian citizenship and accept Russian passports. The de facto border with Georgia was tightened in 2011, with several Georgians subjected to detention by Ossetian and Russian border guards. Russian authorities have prevented ethnic Ossetians from entering Georgia, but travel to Russia is unimpeded.

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