

THE POLITICAL SCENE IN SOUTH OSSETIA: THE 2011-2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND WHAT BECAME OF THEM

Alexander SKAKOV

*Ph.D. (Hist.), Senior Research Fellow,
Work Group Coordinator,
Center for the Studies of Central Asia,
the Caucasus and the Urals-Volga Area,
Institute of Oriental Studies,
Russian Academy of Sciences
(Moscow, the Russian Federation)*

Introduction

By mid-2011, the Republic of South Ossetia (RSO) was gradually sliding into the abyss of a political, social, and economic crisis. The people of South Ossetia had lost confidence in those who ruled them: the republican leaders were making too many mistakes, the republican elite were bogged in contradictions, while postwar rehabilitation was deliberately slowed down. This and the conviction, very popular in the Russian public (and even in the expert community), that the rehabilitation money was being shamelessly embezzled served as another argument in the political struggle raging in the RSO.

Very much as usual, an external factor (in this case Russia) merely added to the far from simple situation. I have in mind certain bureau-

crats accustomed to semi-military discipline and “gray practices.”

Left alone to shift by itself the republic would have degenerated either into another devitalized “Oriental despotic state” (even if a tiny one) or, if the opposition came to power, into a small developing state with a democratic future.

By the November 2011 presidential election, the republic had reached a crossroads: President Eduard Kokoity was completing his second, and last, presidential term.¹

¹ I covered in detail the prehistory of the presidential elections in South Ossetia in A.Yu. Skakov, “Yuzhnaya Ossetia nakanune prezidentskikh vyborov,” *Kavkazskie nauchnye zapiski*, No. 2 (7), 2011, pp. 30-44.

Pre-Election “Casting”

Early in 2011 (when Eduard Kokoity’s second presidential term was drawing to an end), one of four equally possible scenarios was in the offing:

- (1) *Eduard Kokoity amends the Constitution to run for a third term.* It should be said that his personality defies straightforward description along good/evil lines; his role changed along with the circumstances. It seems that after 2008 he lost his bearings; protest feelings were gradually mounting, while Moscow, which no longer trusted the president of South Ossetia, created a new center of power headed by RSO Prime Minister Vadim Brovtsev.

At the same time, a group was set up to initiate a referendum on a constitutional amendment to allow a third presidential term. Its head, Deputy Defense Minister of South Ossetia Ibrahim Gaseev, a bureaucrat without political ambitions, would have never dared to do this without the president's explicit orders. The situation was not that simple: the question of a third presidential term was coupled with the question of Russian becoming the second official language, which, if it failed to be approved at the referendum, would have been an unpleasant surprise for Moscow.

The law enforcers and President Kokoity's retinue, meanwhile, launched a campaign to persuade the public and deputies to support the referendum.

The president put a brave face on a sorry business: he insisted that Moscow was on his side and parried all statements about the opposite signals coming from Moscow by saying that they came from obscure experts and insignificant officials.

On 14 June, 2011, the Supreme Court of South Ossetia ruled that the planned referendum was unconstitutional. This caused what can be described as a *de facto* coup d'état: on 15 June, a group of law enforcers under Ibrahim Gaseev and Igor Alborov, another deputy defense minister, together with Gennady Kokoev and people from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, burst into the parliament to demand approval, under the threat of force, of the contested constitutional amendment. Speaker Stanislav Kochiev, who had barely recovered after an illness, demonstrated a lot of determination. He rebuffed the aggressive invaders who forced 12 deputies (three of them absent from the session) to agree on an alternative: they signed a document on an initiative group for constitutional amendments.

Having achieved this and probably on Moscow's orders, the invaders left; the head of the presidential administration came to the parliament to downplay the situation and keep information away from the Russian media or, at least, to circulate its "softened" version.

This confirmed that the president of South Ossetia had no chance of legally remaining in power. After the events of 15 June, Moscow clearly demonstrated (although not immediately after the scandal) that it did not want to see Eduard Kokoity as president.

- (2) *The president appoints a successor:* this is a time-tested variant (the "Kremlin tandem" being the best proof) which, however, could go askew: in Armenia, Serzh Sargsian, offered the nation as a successor of President Robert Kocharian, once elected started his own fairly independent political course to the displeasure of his predecessor.

At first, Prosecutor-General Taymuraz Khugaev looked like a possible successor, but neither Moscow nor the public wanted him. Not very charismatic and obviously not of "presidential caliber," he was suspected of corruption.² As a close relative of the incumbent (the president's brother Robert Kokoity, Ambassador of the RSO to Abkhazia, was married to Khugaev's sister), he looked like a perfect choice. Eduard Kokoity attached a lot of importance to this fact: he spared no effort to push Khugaev forward by consistently neutralizing opponents, weakening rivals, and trying to persuade Moscow to change its mind.

² [<http://www.cisnews.org/news/5228-generalnyy-prokuror-hugaev-prestupnik-i-dolzhen-sidet-v-tyurme.html>].

- (3) *Moscow selects its own candidate to replace Kokoity as president*; it turned out, however, that Anatoly Bibilov, Minister of Emergencies of South Ossetia, was the worst among possible candidates as obviously ill-suited for the presidency.

It looks as if he was suggested by his omnipotent Russian colleague Sergey Shoigu, the then Minister of Emergencies of the RF. Bibilov, also a minister, can be described as another Khugaev minus corruption charges.³

Kokoity was displeased, yet never outspoken: he supported Bibilov in public and played against him behind his back. Spoiler candidates appeared who deprived Bibilov of what looked like an easy victory. Kokoity's deliberate support of Bibilov (whose anti-rating was huge anyway) did nothing to promote the former's chances. The president was fully aware of the pitfalls and was consistently adding tension to create "controlled instability" to postpone the presidential election.

- (4) *The incumbent's ambitions are clipped to allow the people to elect the president they really want*. This was done in Georgia where the Americans, after allowing the Georgians to vote for the Georgian Dream Party, gained a serious psychological and geopolitical victory, the repercussions of which are probably greater than they look today. This would have been logical in South Ossetia too, yet, unfortunately, this was not done.

The First Election

As a result, Anatoly Bibilov failed his election campaign disgracefully and irrevocably; he listened to those who told him "not to promise anything to anybody" and lost the support of experienced and respected South Ossetian politicians; left without a team he insistently demonstrated that his victory was guaranteed.

The team of Ala Jioeva, who ran for the opposition, talked to all representatives of the republican political elite and distributed among them all the available posts down to the district level.

On 13 November, 2011, election day, Anatoly Bibilov and former Minister of Education Ala Jioeva gathered a more or less equal number of votes—24.86% and 24.8%, respectively, which made a second round inevitable.

The spoilers deprived Bibilov the number of votes he needed to make him president in the first round. Vadim Tskhovrebov, director of a bakery in Tskhinvali, received 9.90% of the votes; Alan Kottaev, Deputy Head of the Administration of Tskhinvali, 9.66%; and Georgy Kabisov, Chairman of the State Committee for Information, Public Relations and Mass Communications, a relative of Khugaev's, 7.62%. Dmitry Tasoev, leader of the unregistered Social-Democratic Party who hoped to reap opposition votes, received 9.50%; Vladimir Kelekhsaev, deputy of the RSO parliament of two convocations who ran for the Communist Party, received 6.65%; other candidates ("extras") received between 0.95 and 3.34% (several hundred votes on the republican scale): they were Chief Bailiff Sergey Bitiev, Soslan Tedety, commander of the SOBR of the republican Ministry of Internal Affairs; Alan Pliev, Deputy Foreign Minister, and Jemal Jigkaev, former Health Minister among the "supporting actors."

For the first time in the history of South Ossetia, the formerly monolith communist electorate split: some people, together with S. Kochiev, leader of the Communist Party of South Ossetia, voted for Bibilov; others preferred Kelekhsaev; the majority followed the opposition.

³ Shortly before the election he was described as "the leader of an organized criminal group" with its center in Vasilkov, a city in Ukraine (see [<http://kavkaz.ge/2011/11/18/kto-takoj-anatolij-bibilov/>] and other sites).

As could be expected, the political landscape changed after the first round: before the second round scheduled for 27 November, Vice Speaker of the RSO parliament Yury Dzitstsoyty abandoned Kokoity to side with Bibilov; A. Jussoev, an influential Moscow businessman, did the same. Kelekhsaev and Pliev supported Ala Jioeva.

Vadim Tskhovrebov, who came third in the first round, announced that he preferred to remain neutral; later he changed his mind and joined Bibilov. The latter, who looked like Kokoity's appointed successor, tried to move as far as possible from the incumbent and his crowd. He demanded that Khugaev, Khugaev's deputy Eldar Kokoev, Georgy Kabisov, Zurab Kabisov who headed the State Committee for Reconstruction, and Atsamaz Bichenov, Chairman of the Supreme Court, resign from their posts before 27 November.

The South Ossetians were very displeased with the people Moscow had dispatched to the republic to supervise its rehabilitation: they turned out to be embezzlers; they stole the money Russia allocated for reconstruction and tried to shift the blame onto the local officials unceremoniously pushed aside from matters financial. Fully aware of this, Bibilov promised to place the stakes on local people and limit appointments of "experts from other places" to deputy heads or assistants.

On 21 November, Anatoly Bibilov met President Dmitry Medvedev in North Ossetia: Moscow had made its choice.

The moment of truth came on 27 November. After tallying up 80% of the votes, the leaders of the republic discovered that Bibilov had received about 40%, while Ala Jioeva was leading with 56.7%. The president and his retinue could accept Bibilov, but they could not accept the opposition leader as president.

In Moscow, people refused to take this for a failure: they spoke about the coup or even a Color Revolution, and started talking about decisive measures.

On 29 November, the Central Elections Commission announced that Ala Jioeva had won the election; on the same day, the ruling Edinstvo (Unity) Party (controlled by Kokoity) asked the Supreme Court of South Ossetia to annul the results because of "numerous violations of citizen rights." The Supreme Court, at Kokoity's beck and call, obeyed. The parliament fixed 25 March, 2012 as the date for the next round, which meant four more months of presidency for Eduard Kokoity. Vice speakers Yu. Dzitstsoyty and M. Tskhovrebov moved to Jioeva's side, which meant that they had severed their ties with the ruling party.

The republic voted against Kokoity and his regime rather than for Ala Jioeva, who could hardly claim the title of the opposition leader with a 3% to 5% approval rating on the eve of the election. The former minister brought together the opposition voters very much contrary to her expectations.

Regrettably, neither Moscow nor Kokoity were ready to accept the voters' choice: Kokoity was prepared to "leave in order to stay," while Moscow wanted a president obedient to its commands. In fact, Ala Jioeva, who depended on sportsman Jambulat Tedeev, the actual leader of opposition, could have easily got rid of this dependence after winning the election (in emulation of Eduard Kokoity's trick).

She submitted an appeal to the republic's Supreme Court; later she and A. Barankevich, her authorized representative, met Eduard Kokoity and Sergey Vinokurov, Head of the Department for Regional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, Administration of the President of RF, with no positive results.

Those who voted for Jioeva and wanted the election results recognized poured into the central square of the republic's capital where they set up a government (the State Council of 10 members) and fixed 10 December as the inauguration date. The republic, brimming with weapons, came dangerously close to an armed confrontation. This was what Eduard Kokoity needed: the opposition provoked into action could be routed enabling him to assume control over the election and get rid of not totally reliable Anatoly Bibilov.

Early on 6 October, Khugaev's apartment was shelled from a grenade launcher, which supplied the republic's leaders with a pretext to close the border with Russia.

The meeting in the central square should be disbanded—this much was clear, but the Kremlin did not want the Kokoity regime to survive in any form; bloodshed in the central square was an even worse prospect. As long as Sergey Vinokurov remained in Tskhinvali, Kokoity and his retinue would not and could not use force.

Nothing is that simple, however: later, after an attack on Ala Jioeva's office, someone spread information that a representative of the Administration of the President of the RF had been present in the office during the attack, leading the expert community and the public of South Ossetia to the conclusion that he had sanctioned the use of force. In fact, it was probably a set-up to discredit the Administration of the President of the RF by shifting the responsibility for the use of force onto it.

On 9 December, at the eleventh hour, Ala Jioeva, without waiting for inauguration, came to an agreement with the opposite side mediated by Sergey Vinokurov (who had probably applied pressure). E. Kokoity, Prosecutor-General T. Khugaev, his deputy E. Kokoev, and Chairman of the Supreme Court A. Bichenov (the most compromised members of the president's men) resigned. Prime Minister Vadim Brovtsev became acting president.

The inauguration was no longer possible; however, Ala Jioeva was able, on 25 March, 2012, to run for president once more. In an effort to end the confrontation, Moscow resorted to the Abkhazian scenario (tested in December 2004 when S. Bagapsh and R. Khajimba came to an agreement to stave off an armed conflict after the presidential election disastrous for the "Moscow supervisors"). This meant a compromise: the results of the previous elections were annulled, which could hardly be described as absolutely legal. This meant that the sides had moved outside the law; the situation could no longer be controlled.

The compromise was faulty from the very beginning because it envisaged resignation of the Prosecutor-General and the Chairman of the Supreme Court. Eduard Kokoity merely promised to dismiss them, but under the law their resignations had to be approved by the parliament, which was not part of the agreement. The president retained his grip on the parliament, which meant that he could save the posts for the prosecutor and the chairman of the Supreme Court without damaging his own reputation. With Chairman of the Supreme Court A. Bichenov still in his post, the president could easily annul any objectionable election results.

Between the Elections: Regrouping and Maneuvering

In December 2011 and January 2012, dual power in the republic was represented by Acting President Brovtsev and Eduard Kokoity, who was still very much in control. The effect was mainly positive with an absolutely new configuration of forces.

By that time it had become known that Vice Speaker Dzitstsoity and Dmitry Medoev, Ambassador of South Ossetia to the Russian Federation, intended to run for presidency. (It is commonly believed in the republic that the latter was kept out of the race by officials from the Presidential Administration of the RF.) Both candidates were equally acceptable (Medoev, who during the political crisis had been vehemently anti-Jioeva, was acceptable to a lesser extent than his potential rival) to the official circles and the opposition. This could close the gap that split society after the election of 27 November.

Another bout of complications was caused by what could easily be predicted: on 17 January, 2012, Ala Jioeva left the compromise because not all promised resignations had been submitted. Moreover, she probably realized that she stood little chance of running again and even less chance of being elected. Some of her former supporters abandoned her while the protest electorate could be lured to several much stronger rivals.

Indeed, Jambulat Tedeev, chief coach of the Russian free-style wrestling team, who had supported Ala Jioeva in November 2011, was contemplating running for presidency. The meeting of 21 January attended by 100 to 200 people confirmed that Jioeva had lost much of her former potential. She may have initially agreed to take several official posts for herself and her closest circle, but no such offers were forthcoming. In this situation she had no other choice but to declare herself the legally elected president of the republic; this improved her rating, at least for a short time. The people and political elite were undecided: on the one hand, no one doubted her victory, while on the other, the majority of the political class and the voters were looking forward to the upcoming election and, therefore, did not take her statement seriously.

Aware of the disorder in the ranks of her opponents, she raised her demands from a couple of official posts to the presidential post and scheduled her inauguration for 10 February. On 23 January, after talking to Acting President Brovtsev, she became even more determined: she rejected compromises, demanded that she should be recognized as the legally elected president, and announced that the upcoming election was illegitimate.

Jioeva managed to consolidate her electorate and gained even more supporters from among those who appreciated her determination and detected vacillations among the republican leaders and presidential candidates. This created a “no-win” situation, which called for more negotiations because Jioeva’s inauguration would have created an intolerable situation of two not quite legitimate presidents in the republic.

Regrettably, the solution was short-sighted and even disgraceful: on 9 February Jioeva’s headquarters were attacked and routed; she was beaten up and hospitalized. Tension increased: it became clear that the people in power, an apology for professional politicians, were not alien to intimidation, the basest of methods of political struggle. The former president controlled the defense and security structures from abroad.

Everything the power structures did earned them no respect from the republic’s population; this is particularly true of the meeting organized on 9 February “in support” of the election scheduled for 25 March, to which the employees of ministries and other official structures were herded.

Tension was mounting as the presidential election drew nearer. After getting rid of the “second president,” the “puppeteers” continued pushing forward their own candidate: it seems that the disgraceful failures of 27 November and of the presidential elections in Transnistria and Abkhazia were safely ignored and forgotten.

It is not easy to conduct sociological polls in a republic where there are no experienced sociologists, however the results of the polls conducted in January and early February 2012 looked quite convincing.

According to the results obtained by Media-Center Ir (under pressure from certain forces, these figures were promptly removed from the Internet) on 20-26 January, 16% of the respondents preferred to see Ala Jioeva president of South Ossetia; 9%, Yu. Dzitstsoyty; 8%, J. Tedeev; 7%, D. Sanakoev; while D. Medoev and M. Tskhovrebov each received 6% of the votes. Forty-eight percent of the polled intended to ignore the elections.

The situation was further aggravated when on 18 February Vice Speaker Yu. Dzitstsoyty, practically the only independent candidate (with the exception of S. Zasseev) and one of the favorites, was kept away from the election under obviously false pretexts. Technically, this action was entrusted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of South Ossetia, which used the fact that the dates on the subscription

lists (they were inserted by those who collected the signatures) and the signatures were written by different people even though the law was very vague in this respect.⁴ During the fall election, those who signed the lists were expected to personally write the entries, the rest was written by the signature collectors. Other candidates, L. Tibilov and D. Sanakoev in particular, were returned their lists with a request to change them according to the instructions. Yu. Dzitsstsoyty's lists were sent straight to the Ministry of Internal Affairs for an expert handwriting appraisal.

According to the available information, the Ministry sent the document with expert opinion to the Central Elections Commission on 15 February, although the findings were not made public until 18 February. The organizers of the "triumph of the rule of law and democracy" were probably biding for time in expectation of signals from Moscow.

Meanwhile, on the evening of 16 February, G. Yanovskaya from Echo of the Caucasus (Tbilisi, PIK [First Information Caucasian Channel]) interviewed Yu. Dzitsstsoyty; later she published bits and pieces from this extensive interview taken out of context on the Internet to paint the following picture: first, it was the leaders of Russia, not Eduard Kokoity, "who were guilty of the ugliness taking place in the republic" and of the attack on Jioeva's headquarters; second, "this has stirred up just indignation" among the people of South Ossetia; if people went to the polls on 4 March (the date of the presidential election in Russia), they would vote against Vladimir Putin, whose name is associated with the above-mentioned scandalous practices. These quotes were, in fact, opposed to Medoev's balanced and loyal statements.

Enraged, Dzitsstsoyty called the journalist to demand an apology and removal of the article; not satisfied with that Dzitsstsoyty sent refutation to the website where his interview had appeared. It was published early the next day (17 February) only to be hastily removed a couple of hours later together with the offending interview.

It, however, survived long enough to be noticed. This looked very much like a classical special operation: anyone who counted could read it and draw conclusions. The question remains: How did the Russian and South Ossetian "puppeteers" find a common language with Georgian anti-Russian journalists? (Let me remind you that Echo of the Caucasus is a joint project of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty funded by the U.S. Congress.)

"Angered citizens" showered the republican media with letters of indignation; it seems that the Kremlin, likewise, was promptly informed about what Dzitsstsoyty "thought" and "had said." It amazed no one, therefore, that his name was removed from the list of presidential candidates.

This meant that insistent, obviously unprofessional, and unconstructive interference in the election campaign (which damaged Russia's basic interests in the region) was accompanied by very strange, to say the least, cooperation between those who started the ball rolling in South Ossetia and Georgian propaganda networks (PIK and Echo of the Caucasus radio and TV channels). This brings to mind what Pavel Milyukov said on 1 (14) November, 1916 in the State Duma in his famous "Stupidity or Treason" speech: "And, does it matter, gentlemen, as a practical question, whether we are, in the present case, dealing with stupidity or treason? The consequences are the same."

What happened to Dzitsstsoyty confirmed that the authorities remained indifferent to public opinion. Sergey Zasseev, leader of the Social-Democrats and one of the potential winners, was likewise removed from the list of candidates.

⁴ Art 30 of the Constitutional Law of RSO on the main guarantees of election rights and the right of citizens of the Republic of South Ossetia to take part in referendums says: "A voter or participant in a referendum should sign a subscription list indicating his last name, first name, and patronymic; date of birth; address of domicile; RSO passport series and number and the date of its issue, as well as the date of subscription. Information about the voters signing the lists in support of a candidate or a list of several candidates may be written by the signature collector. All entries should be made by hand."

It seems that the opposition candidates were kept away from the race by those who had probably learned only one lesson from the November election: the people should not be allowed to choose, they may only participate in “no-alternative elections.”

This time the “Moscow curators” decided to act on a dead certainty—no dark horses on the ballot papers. All popular opposition candidates were safely pushed aside under different, frequently obviously false, pretexts.

It looked as if the republic was being deliberately led to another election disaster that would deprive the republic’s power structures of legitimacy and destroy South Ossetian statehood. The result would be catastrophic for South Ossetia and Russia’s Caucasian policy.

Russia’s interests would have been better served if external unconstructive and rude interference was limited, while the ballot papers contained as long a list of candidates as possible; this would have made the election legitimate and falsifications on a great scale impossible.

By that time, however, annulment of the obviously illegitimate election and the decision to disband the Central Elections Commission looked like the best solution; all candidates who represented the entire spectrum of South Ossetian society were to be registered for a new election.

It could be expected that the majority would ignore both rounds of the presidential election: in fact the low turnout on election day (less than 50% of the voters) was the gravest threat to South Ossetian statehood.

On the other hand, the corrupt South Ossetian clan (the so-called Kokoity clan) and corrupt bureaucrats from North Ossetia and Moscow, hand-in-glove with it, would have preferred a “failed” election and continued conservation of status quo in the republic. They wanted to remain in control through the defense and security structures and parliamentary majority.

No-Alternative Election

The political elite of South Ossetia was trimmed down to four figures acceptable to Moscow and the former president, who was still in control. The final ballot contained four names: Dmitry Medoev, Ambassador of South Ossetia to the RF; Leonid Tibilov, former chairman of the KGB, a man of no ambitions; Ombudsman David Sanakoev, never caught defending human rights, and Stanislav Kochiev, leader of the Communist Party of South Ossetia.

It seems that Medoev had the Presidential Administration of the RF behind him; Tibilov was supported by his Moscow and local colleagues, while Sanakoev was a man of the Kokoity clan. All were decent people untainted by corruption charges, but none of them had figured prominently in local politics, which meant that each of them was acceptable to Moscow and the Kokoity clan.

The fourth candidate, Stanislav Kochiev, speaker of the local parliament and uncontested leader of the local communists, was needed to create the illusion of choice. It was expected that people who had parted with the Soviet past would hardly fancy a communist for president; moreover, Kochiev had not fully recovered after a recent stroke.

This meant a “no-alternative election” pure and simple.

The Kokoity clan would have hailed failure or the election of a puppet (either Tibilov or Sanakoev) as president. Medoev, who sought support in the Moscow corridors of power and was, therefore, out of Kokoity’s control, was less desirable.

Probably advised by Moscow, Dmitry Medoev posed himself as “a man supported by the Kremlin,” therefore it was too risky to remove him from the race, but absolutely safe to use his status of “Moscow favorite” against him. In fact, the earlier developments in the republic doomed any candi-

date supported by the Kremlin and Russian structures to failure. This meant that Medoev's failure could be interpreted as rejection of the Moscow diktat.

The turnout was the worst headache of the Moscow "curators": it remained to be seen whether the people would be willing to take part in a prearranged show with all roles distributed in advance. The organizers relied on the election technologies tested in Chechnia, where the "pre-elected" candidate reaped 90% of the votes with a 95% turnout.

In South Ossetia, people were obviously bored with elections and meetings: they wanted to finally see the end of the endless show.

The protest electorate remained an enigma, but then no one expected concerted voting from it.

It could be expected that a certain portion of the protest electorate would ignore the election or vote "against all" (an option which survived on the ballot papers by oversight) or cast their votes for Kochiev or Tibilov. The latter was supported by Jambulat Tedeev, very popular in South Ossetia, businessman A. Jussoev, former candidate Tskhovrebov, and weathered politician Gobozov. This meant that Tibilov consolidated a large share of the republican political elite, which made the failure of the election less plausible.

Dmitry Medoev, an intellectual and a very decent person, had lived and worked in Moscow far too long: on the one hand, he was forgotten in his own republic; many regarded him as an "alien from another planet." The Kokoity crowd used the media to circulate rumors about his alleged Georgian roots. On the other hand, Medoev, skilled in the games practiced in the Moscow corridors of power and accustomed to "puppet" existence, preferred to remain in the background and take orders from his bosses.

This was a bad mistake: not ordered to act on his own, he did not try to attract those who were displeased or offended (Yu. Dzitsoity and S. Zasseev in particular); he never talked to the protest electorate and remained an alien to the ruling elite, the members of which owed their status to Kokoity and who remained predictably loyal to their former patron.

The fact that he had the Presidential Administration of the RF behind him, the image of which had been tainted by the Jioeva scandal, was a minus rather than a plus. In short, Medoev stood little chance and could somewhat improve his rating only at the expense of the communists.

The systemic mistakes of Dmitry Medoev (and, probably, of his Moscow patrons) destroyed his competitive advantages, even though at first his rating suggested that he would run in the second round. According to one of the polls, he led with 37%; S. Kochiev received 24%; L. Tibilov, 24%, and D. Sanakoev, 15%; another poll produced the following figures: Medoev, 28%; Sanakoev, 28%; Kochiev, 12%, and Tibilov, 5%; 17% said they would stay away from the polling stations.

The elections became a race between Tibilov and Sanakoev. The former placed the stakes on his experience as an official in an effort to draw the largest number of members of the political elite to his side. The latter, young and innovative, and at the same time cautious or even calculating, persistently courted all social and age groups, especially the youth.

He was deliberately moving away from the former president (and his clan), who had lost popularity with the voters. If elected president, he would probably try to get rid of his patron's firm grip, which might be appreciated in Moscow. He had the defense and security structures on his side, together with NGOs and the People's Party devoted to Kokoity. On the eve of the first round, he was one of the favorites with the expert community, which predicted a second round.

South Ossetia surprised everyone again: on 25 March, 2012, Leonid Tibilov won the first round with 46% or 44.81% (according to preliminary calculations) and Dmitry Medoev with 25% came second.

What happened next cannot be explained in rational terms: the share of votes cast for Tibilov and Medoev started shrinking, while the share of Sanakoev's votes (who came third according to preliminary information) started growing.

As a result, it was announced that Tibilov received 42.48%, Sanakoev, 24.58%, and Medoev, 23.79%. It looks as if Sanakoev's results were deliberately inflated at the expense of Medoev's, who, as a well-trained bureaucrat, pretended not to notice. Medoev's votes were stolen pure and simple.

Finally, in the second round, the voters were left to choose between two "technical" candidates, two "Kremlin favorites" and two bureaucrats. The tired voters, who no longer trusted their political leaders and who had lost reference points, had to choose between Tibilov and Sanakoev.

Leonid Tibilov was 60, while David Sanakoev had just turned 35. The former was an experienced bureaucrat, the latter cautious, calculating, and young. The winner (in the second round Tibilov had a much better chance of being elected) had to remain a bureaucrat with no political ambitions. Having excluded politics from everyday life in the Russian regions (and the country as a whole for that matter), certain forces might try to achieve the same in South Ossetia.

The events of the fall of 2011 and winter of 2011/12 did nothing to flatter a "Moscow candidate," but association with the Kokoity clan was even worse. This meant that both of them (especially Sanakoev) had to get rid of unwelcome associations to pass for "independent candidates." They both, on the whole, succeeded. It should be said, however, that Sanakoev's public vows over the graves of fallen soldiers were a bit too much, to say the least.

On the eve of the second round, the fog dissipated. Stanislav Kochiev called on his electorate to vote for Leonid Tibilov, who could also count on the votes of Dmitry Medoev's electorate, some of whom, however, intended to stay away from the polling stations. Primitive arithmetic suggested that Leonid Tibilov would reap at least 65% of the votes: he had 42.80% of those who had voted for him in the first round plus 5.26% of Kochiev's votes and 23.79% of Medoev's (minus those of the Medoev's supporters who would not vote).

Leonid Tibilov and his team could rest assured: the victory was guaranteed, which made falsifications or bribing the voters absolutely unnecessary. The Kokoity camp, likewise, remained absolutely calm: they were probably reluctant to bring "skeletons out of the closet."

Then, practically on the eve of the second round came a bolt from the blue: several corrupt Internet resources and certain obscure newspapers published disgusting articles spearheaded against Tibilov (and not only him): his age, one kidney, previous work in the KGB, contacts with South Ossetians doing business in Russia, etc. were raked up; for better effect he was accused of being a candidate of the Kokoity clan.

This was not all: a notorious lawyer who posed himself as a "human rights activist," Ruslan Magkaev from Vladikavkaz (well-known as an ardent supporter of Ala Jioeva), published a thick volume in which Tibilov looked like a puppet of the Russian oligarchs with Georgian roots (Alexander Ebraldze and others) and through them with Putin's inner circle, suspected, in turn, of allegedly intending to exchange South Ossetia's independence for Mikhail Saakashvili's resignation or, pure and simple, access to Georgian assets.

This was the central accusation in the work written in the best traditions of 1937 (the Great Purge year); he was also accused, absolutely groundlessly, of being involved in the contract killings in South Ossetia during the 1990s, as well as the Zarsk tragedy of 1992, when Georgian fighters fired point-blank at a bus carrying refugees.

It took no wisdom to guess that there were "hidden springs:" it seems that the Kokoity clan had coordinated a far from simple mud-slinging campaign and funded it using the names of Ala Jioeva and her supporters as a smokescreen. Neither Jioeva nor Sanakoev were guilty of this Bacchanalia of lies. This was a well-organized and well-synchronized campaign: its engineers (who had no compromising facts) found the sore spots and mixed everything together in the hopes that the electorate would be unable to separate the wheat from the chaff; Eduard Kokoity still remained outside the fracas.

The accusations hurled at Vladimir Putin and his closest circle meant that Eduard Kokoity had ended the truce with Moscow and come out on the warpath.

This, however, was not enough to close the gap between the two candidates.

The mud-slinging campaign, however, stole a certain share of votes from Tibilov: on 8 April, during the second round, he received 54.12% instead of the expected 65%; Sanakoev, on the other hand, somewhat improved his results by gaining 42.65%.

The “anti-Tibilov strategists” wanted to narrow down the gap between the candidates to start talking about falsifications and annulment of the results for the nth time. It seems that they nearly succeeded.

In Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, obscure individuals offered money left and right to buy more votes for Tibilov (whose rating was high enough anyway)—an obvious provocation.

To supply a pretext under which the results could have been annulled, David Sanakoev should have come out with a statement about falsifications and numerous violations during the election. He never did this because, on the eve, the two candidates met; it seems that Sanakoev, invited to the team of the new president, felt that his political future was assured.

Once more David Sanakoev acted as a cautious and wise politician with good prospects: he refused to dance to the tune of others and pull the chestnuts out of the fire for Kokoity and his retinue.

It should be said that both candidates behaved with great dignity.

Repercussions

Everyone was relieved to realize that no destabilization or a small “coup” staged by the supporters of the former president followed the election: the republic finally left the long period of elections behind to resume living.

The president elect faced a challenge: consolidation of split South Ossetian society; to cope he had to draw to his side as many political heavyweights as possible and deprive the ex-president and his people of their destabilization instruments.

The old parliament staffed with Kokoity’s supporters would be disbanded; the republic needed a new parliament, which could not be elected before the republic’s political field had been reformat- ted. So far it remained split among the divided and demoralized Unity Party, the rapidly marginaliz- ing communists, and the former president’s belligerent supporters, who called themselves the Peo- ple’s Party.

The republic obviously needed new parties: David Sanakoev set up The New Ossetia Party; Dina Alborova, the For Civic Dignity Party, and Ala Jioeva, Ossetia—Freedom Square. The new parties would be able to run for parliament twelve months after the date of their registration, which meant that the present parliament should be preserved in the interests of all.

It should be said that after what happened between the fall of 2011 and spring of 2012, parlia- mentary elections would have brought victory to Jioeva and her supporters, therefore, Leonid Tibilov was determined to work with the old parliament and do his best. So far, preservation or disbandment (in any form) of the present parliament remained closely connected with preservation/liquidation of influence of the Kokoity clan.

During his election campaign, Tibilov relied on a diverse electorate; if elected president, he would have to satisfy the (frequently contradictory) interests of all the main forces and groups: it was a chal- lenge, to say the least.

Interference of supporters and appointees of the former president did not help, even though the most odious figures had disappeared from sight. The ex-president relied on deputies of the Unity Party

and the People's Party to keep Speaker Z. Kokoev in his post; he, however, lost it in court to S. Kochiev.

In his personnel policy, Leonid Tibilov tried to be as independent of Moscow as possible and followed its instructions only when it proved unavoidable. He preferred the so-called Chibirov team (Ludvig Chibirov, the first president of the Republic of South Ossetia), to which his own friends and comrades-in-arms belonged.

The opposition represented by Ala Jioeva (appointed vice premier for social policy) and Anatoly Barankevich (head of the government's staff) got its share of the pie.

The post of foreign minister filled by Murat Jioev was contested by David Sanakoev, who came second in the presidential election. He was too cautious to accept the post of a vice premier as too exposed to criticism. He finally got the coveted position, which he probably regarded as another step up the political ladder. The above suggests the following questions: Is Tibilov in control of the Foreign Ministry of South Ossetia? Is this ministry torn apart by contradictions among Tibilov, Sanakoev, the former president, Ambassador Medoev, and someone else?

Today, there are several "power centers" in the corridors of power and inside the political elite: the Chibirovites and Boris Chochiev, head of the presidential administration; the former opposition headed by Jioeva; the parliament headed by Kochiev, as well as Sanakoev and members of Kokoity's team.

Rostislav Khugaev, the newly appointed prime minister, is not alien to political games either.

In this context, conflicts could not be avoided; all the political figures are busy gaining political weight and pushing their supporters into the power structures. This is best described as "unbalanced equilibrium" or "a war of all against all."

In the future, the new president will probably try to get rid of "too zealous" patrons of all hues: it remains to be seen whether he will succeed.

Leonid Tibilov has no one to rely on: he keeps even the most loyal of his supporters at a distance; the government is anything but a closely knit team.

For some strange reason Kokoity's retinue and some of the Cabinet members remain convinced that Tibilov is a stopgap figure and that Sanakoev (or someone else) will win the next pre-term election.

According to various sources, without the interference of Kokoity or Russian officials, the opposition could win any transparent presidential election.

Today, some of the South Ossetian officials and politicians look convinced, for some enigmatic reason, that Kokoity and his crowd will come back. Indeed, they have probably armed themselves with certain instruments for regaining control over the republic's power structures and organizing pre-term retirement for Tibilov.

To sum up: the fairly senseless and clumsy maneuvers of the Moscow "puppeteers"⁵ destabilized the situation in "not totally recognized" South Ossetia even more. I have already written that in the Russian political tradition these and similar "deeds" were described as "stupidity or treason."

There is no need to hold forth about "Russia's national interests"; suffice it to say that against the background of the recent presidential election in Georgia, perfectly calculated and perfectly or-

⁵ It should be said in this connection that Sergey Vinokurov, Head of the Department of the Presidential Administration of the RF for Regional and Cultural Relations with other Countries, and his deputy Vladislav Gasumyanov (about him see [<http://www.ros-pres.com/government/8918/>, <http://forum-msk.org/material/power/7246764.html>] etc.), who were actively involved in the South Ossetian elections, were removed from their posts in April 2012 immediately after the highly dubious triumph of the presidential marathon in South Ossetia. Sergey Chebotarev, another hero of the election, who headed the department and, according to certain Internet resources, was responsible for carrying out instructions, became deputy head of the same department.

chestrated by the United States, the incompetent or even clumsy intrigues of Moscow officials look even more stupid. In fact, both countries pursued the same aim through very different methods.

Seen from Moscow, South Ossetia should have looked like a “collective farm Soviet style” with a formally elected (appointed) chairman instead of an elected president.

These games in the republic, which remains in a state of war with its former metropolitan country, might cost both South Ossetia and Russia very dearly. More and more people will emigrate, while those who stay behind will become apathetic and resigned to their fate.

If Leonid Tibilov fails to consolidate South Ossetian society, the 2011-2012 elections might be followed by massive emigration. There is the danger that the successful “special” and “cleansing” operations will turn the republic into a large military base with no workforce to run it.
