

Abkhazia Election Cliff-hanger

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Opposition candidate Sergei Bagapsh may have benefited from Russia's heavy-handed endorsement of Prime Minister Raul Khajimba.

The result of the presidential election in the breakaway republic of Abkhazia remains on a knife-edge and it looks increasingly likely that the result will be decided by the ethnic Georgian population of Gali region.

This extraordinary turn of events came about after the opposition candidate Sergei Bagapsh claimed victory and the official candidate - Prime Minister Raul Khajimba - denounced the elections as "unfair".

On October 6, Sergei Smyr, head of the central election commission, backed a compromise proposal whereby there will be a re-run of the vote only in the southernmost Gali region on October 17.

After taking this decision Bagapsh and Smyr went to visit the outgoing Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba at home.

Ardzinba, who has been ill for several years and no longer appears in public, did not accept the compromise and backed his protégé Khajimba. But the entire electoral commission has now backed the plan for a new poll to be conducted only in Gali, where several irregularities were noted in the original ballot.

The often-lawless region of Gali is populated almost exclusively by Georgian-speakers, most of them returning refugees from western Georgia.

The alleged irregularities there included an electricity failure in some of the polling stations, and the distribution of some documents in Georgian language, which contradicts local law. Bagapsh and his supporters, who appear to have done well in Gali, reject these allegations.

This was the first leadership election in Abkhazia, which broke away de facto from Georgia in 1993 after a bloody war, in which voters were offered a genuine choice.

The two main candidates were Sergei Bagapsh, head of Abkhazia's energy company and leader of an alliance of two opposition groups and Raul Khajimba, the current prime minister.

The central electoral commission initially declined to publish any results, while the opposition calculated from its own data from polling stations that Bagapsh had won 51 per cent of the vote and Khajimba 38 per cent. The other three candidates, former foreign minister Sergei Shamba, former prime minister Anri Djergenia and Yakub Lakoba of the People's Party, collected around ten per cent of the vote between them.

On October 5, the electoral commission released preliminary results - not including Gali - which said that Bagapsh was leading with 38,000 votes, while Khajimba had won 29,000 votes. Turnout is estimated at 67 per cent or around 80,000 votes. This means that in theory either candidate could win the election or there could be a second round of voting - although Bagapsh has the edge.

The initial reports that Bagapsh had won led to loud celebrations from his supporters. For several hours a cavalcade of hooting cars zoomed through the streets of Sukhum, with passengers shouting out of the windows "We won!" and "Bagapsh is our president".

At the same time depression had settled over the prime minister's supporters. Their spirits were barely lifted by Russian television news bulletins, which were already reporting that the Moscow-backed candidate had won.

In response to this the head of the electoral commission chided Russian reporters. He told them, "In small Abkhazia, where almost everyone is linked together by family ties, an irresponsible interpretation of the election results can have very serious results. You are transmitting the information but we have to answer for the consequences."

In fact Abkhazia has been split down the middle by this election and several marriages are reported to have broken up because of it. To a large degree this is because the candidates borrowed Russian electoral tactics and went in for mass agitation of voters by attacking their rivals, holding concerts and so on.

On October 5 Khajimba told a press conference that he wanted to see the first round of the election annulled. "If we take into account the mistakes that took place, we can speak about a second round of elections," he said. "I hope our people have enough good sense and no one will use their weapons."

Bagapsh said he was astonished at this. "Usually it is the opposition who challenges election results, but with us it's the other way round, even though all the resources and all the power is in their hands," he said.

"It is also strange suddenly to hear about 'colossal infringements' when on election day all the campaign teams noted that voting was passing off normally."

Almost up until polling day most people had expected that Khajimba, the young prime minister, would be the victor as he had the support of both the outgoing president, Ardzinba, and of the Kremlin. However it seems that Moscow's undisguised support for its candidate may have backfired.

Throughout September Russian politicians visited Abkhazia and campaigned on Khajimba's behalf. A poster showed Khajimba with President Vladimir Putin, reminding voters that the two men met at the end of August in Sochi.

At first no one objected to this. As Abkhazia is an unrecognised state, most people are positive towards Russia, which has handed out passports to Abkhaz and reopened transport links with the republic. Khajimba's ratings went up.

Everything changed on September 30, the day marking the eleventh anniversary of victory in the 1992-3 war. The candidates had agreed they would not use this special day for campaigning. However visiting Russian politicians broke this pact and openly backed Khajimba during ceremonies in the Republican Stadium broadcast live on Abkhaz television.

Nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy announced that, "If you don't vote for Khajimba Russia will close its border with Abkhazia the next day and declare a blockade." Singer and politician Iosif Kobzon said that he was coming to Khajimba's inauguration and would sing at it.

Ordinary citizens, and particularly veterans, were outraged. “They basically turned Victory Day into Raul Khajimba’s inauguration day and insulted the whole of Abkhazia,” said Ruslan Kharabua, an official Hero of Abkhazia and an invalid who lost both legs in the war but was not given a seat in the stadium.

That night a crowd demonstrated outside parliament, which later held an emergency session to criticise Khajimba’s staff for campaigning during the holiday.

One of the demonstrators said, “Basically, the Russian politicians explained to us that the presidential elections had taken place and Raul Khajimba had been appointed. For all our respect for our neighbour, the people of Abkhazia have the right to choose their own leader.”

The interference by Russia may then have played into the hands of Bagapsh, who is now the favourite to be the next leader of Abkhazia.

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