

North Ossetia: Dzasokhov Triumphs in 'Vicious' Election

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The leader of North Ossetia has been re-elected for a second term after a violent and dirty campaign.

Alexander Dzasokhov was re-elected leader of the Russian autonomous republic of North Ossetia on January 27 in what was, even by the turbulent standards of the North Caucasus, one of the most vicious elections of recent years.

The election campaign was punctuated by bomb explosions, the seizure of thousands of newspapers and outrageous allegations about the candidates. Dzasokhov's main rival, Sergei Khetagurov, was disqualified from the ballot.

Given the violent prelude, it was a surprise that election day passed off relatively calmly. Dzasokhov won a second four-year term in the first round with 59 per cent of the vote on a relatively low turnout of 63 per cent.

Dzasokhov - a former Communist Party leader from Soviet times and veteran of Mikhail Gorbachev's Politburo - and Khetagurov - North Ossetia's prime minister until 1993 and a former Russian deputy minister for emergencies - lead two of the biggest political factions in the country and have been locked in a power struggle for the last year.

Over the course of the campaign, the original field of nine candidates was whittled down. On January 17, the high court barred Khetagurov from standing on the grounds that he had given false information in his registration documents. The news shocked the republic as few had expected that Dzasokhov would dispose of his main rival so openly.

Several thousand people demonstrated outside the court, demanding Khetagurov's re-instatement, but were met by lines of policemen. Luckily, the protests did not turn violent.

After Khetagurov's removal, his team switched its support to his colleague and close ally Stanislav Suanov, a retired general, who shared Khetagurov's campaign headquarters. Suanov had a clean reputation, but lacked his patron's charisma and talent for public speaking. Eventually, he collected 29 per cent of the vote.

In the meantime, Khetagurov had appealed to the supreme court in Moscow to overturn his disqualification. But the hearing, held on January 26, the day before the elections, upheld the North Ossetian court's verdict. Khetagurov alleged that the judicial officials had been bribed.

Dzasokhov campaigned throughout North Ossetia and was portrayed by the official media as the friend of ordinary people. His campaign staff even handed out New Year's gifts to children. At one of these public ceremonies, a mother was heard to complain of the president, "Where was he before, in non-election years?"

The campaign was marred by several bombings and the seizure by one man of a local hospital. Five people died in an explosion in Vladikavkaz market and there was also a blast near the car of the interior minister, Kazbek Dzantiev.

The media waged an extremely dirty campaign, raking through the past of the two main candidates. The opposition press suggested that Dzasokhov may have been involved in the mysterious theft of the Soviet Communist Party's gold in 1991. The official media dug up a case from 1993, when Khetagurov was involved in some controversial import-export deals.

Dzasokhov's success can be attributed in part to his dominance of the local media and in part to official support from Moscow. This is perhaps because he was perceived as someone familiar and reliable. It may also have been because the Russian government saw Khetagurov as ambitious and unpredictable. In 1992, he had called, for example, for Russian forces, keeping the peace between Ossetian and Ingush villagers, to be withdrawn from North Ossetia, unless they were deployed in Ingushetia as well.

In the end, however, it mostly came down to internal politics. North Ossetia is a small and compact republic and on election day government employees risk losing their jobs if they back the "wrong side".

The fallout from this election promises to be no different and Khetagurov's supporters will not be reassured by Dzasokhov's declaration that he has been re-elected the president of all North Ossetians. The most likely result of the suppression of Khetagurov is that the region's opposition will band together more strongly.

"People believed in Khetagurov and now he can't just disappear from the scene. Opposition forces will surely now have to get organised," said Zhanna Tuaeveva, a local political analyst.

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