

## **South Ossetia: President Builds Power Base**

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A new pro-presidential party hopes to dominate South Ossetia's next parliament

South Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity looks set to strengthen his position and powers in Sunday's parliamentary elections.

Kokoity will continue his efforts to assert himself in the unrecognised republic, just as attention in Tbilisi is being switched to South Ossetia following the peaceful ouster of Aslan Abashidze in Ajaria earlier this month.

South Ossetia unilaterally declared independence in 1992, after a conflict with the government in Tbilisi, and has lived apart from Georgia ever since.

Last summer Kokoity, who has been in office since December 2001, purged his government and security structures. He removed a group of men known as the "Tedeyev group" who had dominated the republic's economy for several years, in particular the lucrative freight traffic down the main highway from Russia.

Now he appears to have his sights on Stanislav Kochiev, the veteran leader of South Ossetia's Communist Party and the outgoing speaker of parliament, in which the Communists currently have a majority of seats.

A new pro-presidential party known as Edinstvo or "Unity", and modelled on President Vladimir Putin's party "United Russia", was founded a year ago and hopes to capture a majority of seats in the May 23 poll.

There is much speculation in South Ossetia that Kokoity hopes, as Putin has effectively done in Russia, to downgrade the role of parliament and turn it into a "ministry for passing laws". In a television interview that caused a stir in the region, Gleb Pavlovsky, a political analyst close to the Kremlin, said the elections in South Ossetia were going according to a plan written in Moscow, not Washington.

Kochiev told IWPR that the election of a one-party parliament would divide South Ossetia, a situation "which can't be permitted when the conflict is still unresolved".

"It could be dangerous for the president himself, too since in that case absolutely all the responsibility rests on him," Kochiev said.

There are just 34 seats in the republic's parliament, four of which remain unoccupied because they were set aside for deputies from ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia which refused to take part in the 1999 election.

The remaining 30 seats are being fought over both in straight constituency contests and on a party list system. Edinstvo is putting up considerably more candidates than the Communist Party for all seats. There are just 33,500 registered voters.

The two main parties competing in the elections have very similar programmes, pledging that they want to

resolve the conflict with Georgia, strengthen relations with North Ossetia across the mountains, and become part of Russia. Edinstvo's slogan is "Unity - our Road to Russia!"

All the candidates are also vying for the patriotic vote. With the republic feeling vulnerable following events in Ajaria, outspoken member of parliament Georgy Cheldiev attacked the president's choice of appointees, saying that, "We are being ruled by deserters!" Cheldiev said that the current leadership mainly consisted of people who had left South Ossetia when fighting was at its height.

In answer to this, Kokoity told a press conference on May 17 that, "the time for chatter is over; everyone has to show their patriotism and competence by concrete actions which people can see."

Political analyst Batradz Kharebov said no one doubted the coming victory for Edinstvo. "I think that the parliament will change by more than two-thirds, it will get much younger," he said. "But it won't get more professional - rather the reverse."

The previous parliament fought a long-running battle with Kokoity's predecessor Ludvig Chibirov over the division of powers in the republic.

An official in the presidential administration, who asked not to be named, conceded that the new parliament would have fewer stronger individuals in it. "The outgoing group of deputies, although almost all belonged to one party, was still formed by the people choosing particular candidates," he said.

But Julietta Ostayeva, pro-rector of South Ossetia's State University, argued that the new parliament would be more effective than its predecessor.

"I am convinced that through the party system, we can make a significant contribution to building civic society and involving a wider circle of people in running the state," she said.

The election campaign has so far failed make an impression on voters. In March almost 100 per cent of those South Ossetians who have acquired Russian passports voted in Russia's presidential elections. No one is expecting that kind of turnout this time around for the republic's own poll.

"I have observed that people are pretty uninterested in the coming elections," said Alimbeg Pliev, a deputy who is running for another term. "People are tired of endless promises and few people believe their life will seriously get better."

"Whoever they choose, nothing will change in our daily lives," said a trader at the market in Tskhinval, the South Ossetian capital. "It doesn't matter - our fate will be decided by whatever Russia and America decide."

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