

## **South Ossetians Caught Between Two Presidents**

**Author:** [Alan Tskhurbayev](#)

Fear and confusion among South Ossetians as they are courted by new pro-Georgian leader. Although Alan Jioyev lives in Tskhinval, the capital of the unrecognised republic of South Ossetia which de facto seceded from Georgia in 1991, he has just returned from a holiday on the Georgian Black Sea coast.

All of Jioyev's holiday expenses were paid for by the "alternative government of South Ossetia", led by a pro-Georgian figure, Dmitry Sanakoyev.

"My family has never had a holiday like it," Jioyev told IWPR. "Everything was top class. We stayed in a four-star hotel and didn't have to worry about anything. Even services that others had to pay for were free for us. My children had never seen anything like it."

People in Tskhinval say that up to a thousand South Ossetians may have taken these free Georgian-funded holidays, although no one talks about it openly for fear of retribution from the de facto South Ossetian authorities.

For the past nine months, the tiny territory of South Ossetia has found itself with two men claiming to be its leader - Eduard Kokoity, the president of the self-declared (and unrecognised) republic, and a more recent arrival, the pro-Georgian Sanakoyev.

Kokoity is based in the South Ossetian capital Tskhinval (which Georgians call Tskhinvali), while Sanakoyev operates out of the nearby ethnic Georgian village of Kurta.

Recently, the power struggle has intensified, with Sanakoyev - a former prime minister and defence minister in Tskhinval - named by Georgia as head of a new "provisional administrative unit" in South Ossetia and embarking on a major public relations campaign to win over public opinion.

Tension has grown as the Tbilisi government has poured money into ethnic Georgian villages around Kurta, including building a big fun park. For their part, the Tskhinval authorities are blockading the roads leading to these villages.

"The local authorities won't open the road because they're afraid Ossetians will start going to the disco that Sanakoyev built," said Sarmat, a student at South Ossetia's university.

"Nowadays, there isn't the strong ideological trend that existed in the early Nineties, straight after the war - everything is decided by money," said a local man who was a combatant in the 1991-92 war which ended in South Ossetia declaring independent status. "And Dmitry Sanakoyev has a lot of money."

The road that has been closed is part of the major highway that links South Ossetia with Russia on the northern side of the Caucasus mountain range. The move has greatly inconvenienced the residents of Tskhinval, who have been forced to use an unmetalled side-road through the mountains instead.

Most people in Tskhinval label Sanakoyev a traitor for going over to the Georgians. Two rallies have been held in the city against the “alternative government”, one outside the house of Sanakoyev’s father.

“Dmitry Sanakoyev is a real traitor and a disgrace to our family name,” said Inal Sanakoyev, who is not related to the pro-Georgian leader despite sharing the same surname

The South Ossetian prosecutor’s office has launched criminal proceedings against Sanakoyev and his supporters, on charges of “extremism” and “betrayal of the motherland.”

The Tskhinval administration was particularly angered when Sanakoyev was able to put his case to a committee of the European Parliament in June, as part of a Georgian delegation.

“If the European Union takes any steps to recognise Sanakoyev, it will mean European democracy is in a state of crisis,” said South Ossetian government spokeswoman Irina Gagloyeva.

Although officials from international organisations have met Sanakoyev, they have yet to recognise him as a formal political actor in the South Ossetian dispute.

The United States has gone furthest, with Assistant Secretary of State Matt Bryza saying in Tbilisi on July 27, “The fact that Mr Sanakoyev seems to have growing support in South Ossetia is just a fact; it’s a reality.”

In Tskhinval, IWPR found there was little support for Sanakoyev, even in private. “The number of people who support Dmitry Sanakoyev is growing, although the majority still sincerely believe he is a traitor,” said Timur, a young resident of Tskhinval

But people are also unhappy with the way their own government is running things. The economy is in a poor state, roads are closed, and there is virtually no trade. Power cuts are common, water is available only for a few hours each day, and there is no hot water at all.

The general atmosphere is of fear and suspicion. Local television broadcasts urge people to “be vigilant” and “look out for suspicious people” – the kind who might be working for the Sanakoyev administration.

“Anyone who dares to say openly that Sanakoyev is better than Kokoity, or even anyone who simply criticises Kokoity, is definitely going to have problems,” said Timur. “For example, they might lose their job.”

Some people in Tskhinval blame Kokoity for creating an environment in which a figure like Sanakoyev could emerge.

“Sanakoyev is a consequence of the activities of Eduard Kokoity,” said an analyst in South Ossetia who did not want to be named. “He is a result of Kokoity’s policies, which artificially create enemies. The word

'opposition' has become a term of abuse, and they look for spies on every corner. Kokoity needs something to build his popularity on, and as there is no war, everyone is looking for spies."

Alan Chochiev, who led the South Ossetian civil rights movement Adamon Nykhas in 1989-92, is even more critical.

"Kokoity's only legitimacy derives from those people who are ready to die [for the cause of independence], but not for him. He's merely become a figurehead for those who think his policies will take them to independence. But it isn't true. His policies are leading them towards Georgia."

Vissarion Aseyev, a political activist in North Ossetia, a separate territory which is part of Russia, argues that despite his pro-Georgian stance, Sanakoyev actually holds out a better hope of future independence for South Ossetians than Kokoity does.

"Sanakoyev has done what Kokoity should have done long ago - he began a dialogue not with Moscow but with Tbilisi," said Aseyev. "If Kokoity had done that earlier, we would have been at least half way along the road to independence. But in trying to move towards independence by winning recognition from Moscow, we are moving in the wrong direction."

Moscow has consistently backed the South Ossetian claim to separation from Georgia, and there has been recurrent talk that ultimately, the de facto statelet could be annexed to Russia.

However, Sanakoyev's standing among his Georgian allies is less secure than it might seem.

A source in Tbilisi close to government described the "alternative" South Ossetian leader a "PR project for the West," citing his June trip to Brussels as an example of this.

The source said that there was concern in Tbilisi that Sanakoyev, who fought on the South Ossetian side in the conflict, might change sides yet again and turn against the Georgians.

Some of the local people interviewed by IWPR expressed a general sense of disillusionment with politicians who are using them as pawns.

"People are just tired," said an elderly woman named Maria. "They are angry with Russia and with the local [South Ossetian] authorities. How much more can they feed us with promises that we will join Russia? The situation here is terrible, which is why people are looking for some alternative."

(Alan Jioyev is not the real name of the man interviewed in this article.)

Alan Tskhurbayev is IWPR's North Caucasus Editor, based in Vladikavkaz.

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