

Deep crisis in South Ossetia – the internal and regional aspects

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On 9 February Alla Dzhioyeva, the leading opposition activist in the separatist republic of South Ossetia, was severely beaten by security forces who broke into her headquarters. A day earlier, the local parliament passed an amendment to the electoral law, preventing Dzhioyeva under a formal pretext from running in the re-run presidential elections scheduled for 25 March.

Dzhioyeva won the second round of the presidential elections on 27 November, defeating the Kremlin-backed candidate Anatoly Bibilov, but the Supreme Court invalidated the vote, giving illegal actions of her staff as the reason. New elections have been called, but Dzhioyeva has been prohibited from running in them as she has been found guilty of an electoral violations. The decision led to mass protests by her supporters. After mediation by a Kremlin representative, a compromise was reached: Dzhioyeva would call off the protests, and in exchange she would be able to participate in the re-run elections. At the same time, the Attorney General and the President of the Supreme Court were to be dismissed. But both functionaries remained in their posts, so Dzhioyeva broke the agreement; she declared that she was the legitimate president, and set 10 February as the date for her inauguration (which did not take place). Dzhioyeva also has the support of Dzhaambolat Tedeyev, the former Russian national wrestling coach, who is popular in the republic (he would have stood in the autumn elections himself, but he was not registered to do so).

Commentary

- The question of the presidential elections is contributing to the destabilisation of the situation in the para-state of South Ossetia (which is formally a part of Georgia). Dzhioyeva's supporters may resort to violence. Tactical concessions could still be made by the Ossetian authorities, which are completely controlled by Russia, but real concessions to the opposition are not possible. Moscow's next candidate, South Ossetia's ambassador to Russia Dmitry Miedoyev, is regarded as having the best chance of winning the re-run elections.
- The affair of Dzhioyeva and the elections is a manifestation of the deep crisis in which South Ossetia found itself after the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 and its subsequent cessation of all contact with Tbilisi. The unrecognised republic is losing population (it currently has about 30,000 residents, compared to around 70,000 in 2007), which is also

dramatically reflected in the quality of the local elite. The para-state's institutions are weak, and are only being maintained by financial and personnel support from Russia. The economy is completely dependent on subsidies from Moscow.

- South Ossetia is a convenient tool for Moscow to put pressure on Tbilisi, and a strong foothold on the nerve centre of the southern Caucasus (thanks to its proximity to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, among other reasons). The most important instrument of Russian policy is the military infrastructure there: the military base in Tskhinvali, which holds about 1700 soldiers, and the border troops. Russia's instrumental use of the para-state may in the long run undermine the latter's reluctance towards Tbilisi.
- The Dzhioyeva case is characteristic of the Kremlin's policy in the republics of the North Caucasus, which in part is based on total support for the ruling teams and ignoring any independent circles, even those who are fully loyal (Dzhioyeva has guaranteed that her supporters will vote for Vladimir Putin; the para-state's residents have Russian passports). In the long run, this approach is not conducive to the region's stability, something which must arouse concern in the context of the Winter Olympics in nearby Sochi planned for 2014.