

Election scandal in South Ossetia

Wojciech Górecki, Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga

The Supreme Court of South Ossetia (a breakaway republic on Georgian territory) annulled the results of the second round of presidential elections held on 27 November. According to preliminary data from the Electoral Commission, which was published before the Court's decision, the opposition candidate and former education minister Alla Joyeva won the election, with almost 57% of the votes. She defeated Anatoly Bibilov, the minister for emergency situations, who was supported by the republic's government and Russia; he obtained 40% of the vote. Both candidates are pro-Russian politicians; however, Bibilov had campaigned under the slogan of South Ossetia joining the Russian Federation. The Unity party, which supported Bibilov, accused Joyeva's supporters of having put pressure on voters and the electoral commissions, and of commenting on the election results before they were officially announced. The Supreme Court has acknowledged the validity of these accusations, and the Ossetian parliament has set 25 March 2012 as the date for new elections. Joyeva will not be able to take part in them, as she has been found guilty of the above-mentioned infringements. Until the new elections, the outgoing president Eduard Kokoity will continue to head the government. Ignoring the court decision, Joyeva declared herself president and appointed a State Council. On 30 November, about three thousand of her supporters began a protest on the streets of the republic's capital, Tskhinvali. The annulment of the elections was supported on the same day by the Russian Foreign Ministry, which in a statement called for the court's decision to be respected.

Commentary

- The manner in which the elections were annulled, along with the exclusion of the actual winner – a representative of the opposition – is a manifestation of governmental arrogance which is extreme even by the standards of the CIS. The Supreme Court did not give any convincing reasons for its decision. It was motivated by the dissatisfaction of the republic's government at the defeat of their candidate, and perhaps also by a desire to meet Russia's expectations. As a consequence, the situation in the republic has been destabilised.
- Bibilov's defeat in the elections is the second for a Kremlin candidate in a para-state in this region (after Raul Khajimba's defeat to Sergei Bagapsh in Abkhazia in 2004). This shows that Moscow is trying to use methods in the Caucasus which have worked well in

the rest of Russia, without taking into account the Caucasus's specific regional characteristics (tipping its hat to a candidate in an election is negatively perceived as undue pressure).

- Domestic issues also contributed to Bibilov's loss; he had been supported by Kokoity, who has become extremely unpopular recently. The less well-known Joyeva was supported by the most serious opposition candidate Jambolat Tedeyev, the Russia national wrestling coach, who was prevented from running in the elections due to a technicality.
- Russia's influence in South Ossetia, which includes the para-state's total dependence on Russian grants, is so great that the republic cannot hope to attain any degree of freedom. The South Ossetians themselves have not sought to weaken their ties with Russia, because this would impede their contacts with North Ossetia, considered the centre of the Ossetian identity. (In a referendum held together with the first round of elections on 13 November, almost 83% of the republic's population supported granting Russian the status of the second state language).
- The Kremlin's support for Bibilov, who campaigned for the incorporation of South Ossetia into the Russian Federation, may be a signal that Russia is considering formally incorporating the para-state. However, it is also quite possible that in the future Moscow may want to 'give' South Ossetia to Georgia in exchange for control over the whole country, or to use the prospect of such a step as a bargaining chip with the Georgian government.