

Abkhazia: Khajimba re-elected

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On 8 September, the second round of presidential elections in the separatist republic of Abkhazia, which is unrecognised by the international community, was won by the para-state's former leader Raul Khajimba, who narrowly defeated the opposition candidate Alkhas Kvitsinia (by 47.4% to 46.2%; the remaining votes were invalid, or cast against both candidates). The turnout was 66%. The opposition, citing procedural irregularities, has not ruled out protesting the results in court. Georgia recognised the elections as illegal, an assessment shared in a joint statement by the United States, Canada and a group of European countries including Poland.

Commentary

- In the Soviet period – and formally at present – Abkhazia is an autonomous republic of Georgia, but Tbilisi lost control over it in a war in 1992-3. After the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008 Russia, followed by several other countries including Venezuela and Syria, recognised the territory (as well as South Ossetia) as an independent state. Despite its disputed status, administrative structures operate relatively efficiently in Abkhazia and there is political pluralism, and elections are held in conditions of real competition. At the same time, however, corruption is a major problem; the few profitable assets (mainly in the tourism sector) are the property of a narrow clannish-business elite, and most of the Georgian-Mingrelian population, who predominate in the east of the republic, are in practice deprived of their civic rights (to get an Abkhazian passport, which for example is needed to take part in elections, they would have to renounce their Georgian documents, which would make it harder to maintain contact with Georgia proper; they are numbered at around 50,000, out of Abkhazia's total population of around 200,000 to 250,000).
- Over the last decade, Abkhazia has been *de facto* incorporated into the Russian defence, economic and social space; in practice it has become an 'associated territory' of the Russian Federation. Moscow exercises full control over the para-state (a Russian military base and border guards are present on the territory, which is dependent on subsidies from the Russian budget), but has avoided open interference in the republic's internal life. Moscow did not designate a preferred candidate in the recent elections, although Khajimba's reception by Vladimir Putin before the first round could have been perceived as a sign of its support (the other contenders also advocated a close alliance with Russia, although Kvitsinia's group has emphasised the importance of the republic's independence to a greater extent than Khajimba).

- The election result will have no effect on thawing Georgian-Abkhazian relations or Russian-Georgian relations as a whole. Moscow believes that the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is not subject to discussion, and is trying to force Georgia to accept this state of affairs on at least a *de facto* level. This is aided by the process of so-called 'borderisation', i.e. the construction of fortifications along the line between South Ossetia (referred to in Georgian terminology as the 'Tskhinvali region') and Georgia proper, and the process of gradually shifting their outposts in the direction of the latter. This tactic is intended to encourage Tbilisi to demarcate the 'border' on its site, and to persuade Georgia to declare that it will not attack the separatist regions. Tbilisi's condition for normalising relations with Russia is for the latter to annul its recognition of the para-states and withdraw Russian troops from Georgian territory. At the same time Tbilisi is open to day-to-day cooperation (trade, tourism etc.).