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South Ossetian Leader's Authoritarianism Posing Problems for Moscow

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity's efforts to make himself president for life has turned the territory into one "free from law," discrediting his regime in the eyes of the people there, providing excuses for Belarus and other countries not to recognize him, and compromising Moscow's ability to control the spending of Russian assistance there.

All these problems were highlighted last week when a group of Kokoity's political opponents came to Moscow to lobby for Russian intervention to guarantee the legality of the May 31 elections and specifically calling on the Kremlin to oppose Kokoity's plans to change the republic's constitution so as to allow him to run for additional terms.

Opposition figures told seemingly anyone in the Russian government who would listen that Kokoity's drive for personal power is not only discrediting him and his regime at home and abroad, but is also discrediting the Russian authorities, who have found themselves forced to support him despite some obvious misgivings.

After having had problems with Kokoity over the appointment of officials in his government, the Kremlin has decided, however, to back the South Ossetian opposition: Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the Russian presidential administration, said on television channel Vesti 24 that South Ossetia should preserve the existing term limitations in the South Ossetian constitution.

On the one hand, the Kremlin could not do less. General Anatoly Barankevich, a hero of the August 2008 war, said that as a result of Kokoity's authoritarianism, "that territory is free from law" and rapidly being discredited in the eyes of the population there because of its falsification of elections, corruption, and attacks on opposition groups.

But on the other, it could hardly do more, at least in public. Since it recognized South Ossetia as an independent country last summer, a step only Nicaragua has followed, Moscow has insisted that Tskhinvali has a democratic government, something that excessive interference would call into question and reduce the likelihood any other country would grant recognition.

According to reports from Tskhinvali, the upcoming parliamentary elections will be anything but democratic. In his drive for personal power, Kokoity has muscled aside the two main opposition parties and planned to push through a constitutional amendment eliminating the restriction on anyone serving more than two consecutive terms as president.

According to Politcom.ru, Naryshkin's statement is intended to "send a signal" to Kokoity that Moscow won't interfere in the upcoming parliamentary vote &mdash such interference would in any event likely be counterproductive at this point &mdash but that it does not want him to remain in office after he finishes his second term next year.

Thus, Kokoity was, in the words of the Moscow portal, "politely" asked to find a successor and thus open the way for Moscow to take greater control of the situation than it has at present. But Kokoity's past behavior suggests that he may equally "politely" ignore the question and push ahead with his own plans.

"What in that case might the Kremlin do with 'the head of a young independent state?'" Politcom.ru asks. And while it provides no answers, there are a number of possibilities, ranging from his replacement in a coup, something that would undermine the status of Tskhinvali and Moscow still further, to the absorption of South Ossetia into the Russian Federation.

That latter step is something Kokoity has sometimes suggested he would like, but it too would create problems for Moscow, which would then be forced to explain again how its military actions in Georgia last August could be justified if they resulted not in self-determination for the two states, as the Russian side claimed, but annexation.

At the very least, South Ossetia and its leadership appear set to cause Moscow more headaches in the future than Abkhazia will, even though, or perhaps because, the regime there has more support domestically and more backing from Circassians and other communities who view an independent Sukhumi as the first step in their effort to restore their homelands in the North Caucasus.

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