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Georgian Provinces to Vote for the Duma

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More than 150,000 people in Georgia's breakaway provinces could participate in the Russian State Duma elections in December — and vote for the ruling party, news reports said Tuesday.

The Central Elections Commission is planning to set up polling stations inside military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, commission secretary Nikolai Konkin said in comments carried by national media.

The announcement is likely to anger Georgia, which accuses Moscow of military occupation and de facto annexation of its two separatists regions.

Moscow greatly stepped up its military presence in both regions following the August 2008 war with Georgia, deploying more than 3,000 troops for each of the two regions.

The military will even staff the stations instead of locals, most of whom are not eligible to man polling stations in Russian elections because they hold dual citizenships, Konkin told Rossiiskaya Gazeta.

Most Abkhaz and South Ossetian citizens hold Russian passports, in addition to locally issued documents, since Moscow began actively distributing its passports there in the late 1990s. But only the Kremlin's decision to recognize the territories' independence in 2008 created conditions for conducting fully fledged elections there, Konkin said.

According to data by the election watchdog, some 125,000 potential voters live in Abkhazia and about 43,000 in South Ossetia, Kommersant reported, adding that out of the combined 168,000, only 124,000 live permanently in the two regions. An election commission spokeswoman could not immediately confirm the figures.

Experts said that while population figures for both territories are notoriously unreliable, it is more than likely that those who do participate will vote for the ruling United Russia.

In the 2007 Duma elections, more than 290,000 Russians cast votes outside the country, with 78 percent of them voting for United Russia — significantly more than the 64 percent the party got in total, according to statistics on the Central Elections Commission's web site.

For the 2008 presidential elections — held before Russia recognized independence of the two previously Georgian provinces — the number of voters who participated abroad rose to 330,000. Of them, 85.8 percent voted for the Kremlin's candidate, Dmitry Medvedev, who got 70.3 percent overall.

The elections commission is also helping Abkhazia organize its own presidential election, slated for Aug. 26. Commission chairman Vladimir Churov told Interfax last week that one of his deputies, Stanislav Vavilov, had flown to Abkhazia to offer assistance.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe will send a fact-finding mission to Moscow this month to prepare plans to monitor the upcoming Duma elections, a spokesman said Tuesday.

Four experts will be dispatched between Aug. 22 and 28 to assess the situation on the ground, the spokesman, Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer, said by telephone from Warsaw.

The experts' report, which will be available in September, will form the basis of the decision about the size and the duration of the OSCE's observer mission, he said.

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