

South Ossetia Votes for New President

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Eduard Kokoity leaving a booth at a polling station in Tskhinvali on Sunday. **Eduard Korniyenko**

TBILISI, Georgia — The breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia voted Sunday in its first presidential election since Russia recognized it as an independent state after a brief war with Georgia three years ago.

Voters in the tiny mountainous region with a population of some 30,000 were choosing among 11 candidates to replace Eduard Kokoity, a former wrestling champion whose second term is expiring.

Preliminary results were expected to be announced Monday. The new president will take office later this month.

Georgia has said the vote is illegitimate and accused Moscow of occupying part of its territory, where Russia has based thousands of soldiers since the conflict in August 2008.

Apart from Russia, only two South American states and a tiny Pacific island nation will acknowledge the winner of the polls.

Western governments have condemned Moscow for not withdrawing troops in line with a 2008 cease-fire and will be watching the vote for signs of friction between Georgia and Russia in the South Caucasus, a vital transit route for oil and gas from the Caspian Sea.

“The so-called elections don’t have any political or legal meaning for us since they are not recognized by us and by the international community,” said Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Nino Kalandadze.

There have been few reliable opinion polls, but analysts said Anatoly Bibilov, 41, the minister of emergencies under Kokoity, appeared to be leading the field.

Bibilov was openly backed by several Russian lawmakers and the head of the neighboring southern Russian province of North Ossetia, Teimuraz Mamsurov.

All candidates share pro-Kremlin sympathies and an anti-Georgian stance. The outcome of the vote was unlikely to affect South Ossetia’s deep dependence on Russia as its economic lifeline and military protector.

But Kokoity is widely seen to have fallen out of favor with the Kremlin over the embezzlement of Russian funds earmarked to rebuild the region. Reconstruction has been halting, and much of the main city of Tskhinvali is still in ruins.

“These elections are the dirtiest in the whole history of South Ossetia,” Kommersant wrote ahead of the vote. “To say that out on the street you sink knee deep in mud is an understatement.”

Voters also are being asked whether they want Russian to become the region’s second official language after Ossetian.

Moscow recognized South Ossetia and Georgia’s other rebel region, Abkhazia, after crushing a Georgian assault to reassert control over the breakaway province in August 2008, following months of rising tensions.

Like Abkhazia, South Ossetia threw off Georgian rule in wars in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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