

S. Ossetia Presidential Race Headed to 2nd Round

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TBILISI, Georgia — A former KGB chief topped the poll in the first round of voting to become president of the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia and now faces a runoff against a human rights ombudsman after Russia's preferred candidate was eliminated.

Leonid Tibilov, who is still widely considered loyal to Moscow after a career with the Soviet security service, won more than 42 percent of votes Sunday, election officials said.

His opponent on April 8 will be ombudsman David Sanakoyev, 35, who won about 25 percent of votes.

Kremlin favorite Dmitry Medoyev dropped out after polling 24 percent of votes, but the outcome of the election is unlikely to alter South Ossetia's heavy dependence on Moscow, which fought a five-day war with Georgia in 2008.

"Today's figures show that my candidacy is taken normally. Let's hope the second round confirms this," Tibilov, 59, told reporters.

He denied that Moscow was behind him but said he would consult Russia before choosing a government if he became president.

The winner will be South Ossetia's first new president since Moscow recognized the small mountainous region across its southern border as an independent nation after the 2008 war.

Georgia says the vote is illegitimate. South Ossetia, which has run its own affairs with Russian backing since the early 1990s, is recognized as independent by only a handful of nations.

South Ossetia's top court annulled the results of a disputed November presidential poll, which showed the winner was former regional Education Minister Alla Dzhioyeva.

The election was rerun after Dzhioyeva was accused of electoral violations by Anatoly Bibilov, a rival who had been seen as the Kremlin favorite.

Backed by thousands of protesting supporters, Dzhioyeva claimed victory anyway and set her inauguration for Feb. 9.

The inauguration was thwarted when police raided her headquarters that day and attempted to take her out for questioning. Dzhioyeva's blood pressure soared during the raid, her staff said, and she was hospitalized in serious condition. She was released only several days ago.

Bibilov chose not to run again, and Russia had avoided publicly backing any candidate this time.

Tibilov and Sanakoyev both distanced themselves from outgoing President Eduard Kokoity, who stepped down in December and said in 2008 that South Ossetia would eventually become part of the Russian Federation.

"In November-December, it became very clear that those supported by Kokoity did not win. Everyone saw it," Sanakoyev told Reuters.

(Reuters, AP)

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