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EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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Several illegitimate presidential elections have been held in Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia since 1991. The Kremlin, in many cases, had its favorite in these elections, expressing its support openly. In several cases, the Kremlin's favorite candidate was defeated to a great surprise for everyone, including for the Georgian public. The incorrect assessments of the political processes taking place in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia on the part of Georgians indicate that we are not very familiar with the intricacies of the processes unfolding in the occupied regions.

## **Illegitimate Presidential Elections in Abkhazia**

Six illegitimate presidential elections were held in the de facto republic of Abkhazia since the end of Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in 1993, one of these being non-direct and five direct elections. Four de facto presidents were elected in Abkhazia in this period. The Kremlin's active involvement in the election processes begins during the period of Vladimir Putin's governance.

### **First Elections (1994)**

The position of the president was first introduced in the de facto republic of Abkhazia after the end of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in 1994. The first president was elected on November 26, 1994 through a non-direct process by the parliament. Vladislav Ardzinba,<sup>1</sup> a distinguished figure in Abkhazian politics, recognized as a war hero and with the unconditional support of the remaining population of Abkhazia after the victory in the conflict, became the first president.

### **Second Elections (1999)**

The first direct illegitimate presidential elections in the de facto republic of Abkhazia were held on October 3, 1999 in which Vladislav Ardzinba, running together with Valeri Arshba,<sup>2</sup> won in a competition without opponents. Due to health problems, Ardzinba has recused himself from public policy since 2002. Ardzinba delegated the task of governance to Prime Minister Raul Khajimba who enjoyed massive support from Russia. Khajimba served as the Chairman of the State Security Service of Abkhazia from 1999 to 2001, simultaneously holding the position of the Deputy

Prime Minister, moving to the position of the Minister of Defense from 2002 to 2003 and finally ending up as the Prime Minister in 2003-2004. Given the health problems suffered by Ardzinba,<sup>3</sup> holding the office of the Prime Minister must have facilitated Khajimba in becoming president.

### **Third Elections (2004-2005)**

The first time Russia openly joined the election process was during the period of selecting Ardzinba's successor. According to the Kremlin's view, there were no impeding factors in the process of transferring Ardzinba's power to Raul Khajimba. At first glance, everything was going according to the plan; however, by incorrectly evaluating the local public mood, the Kremlin suffered serious damage to its reputation. In order to restore its image, the Kremlin was forced to resort to various forms of leverage towards its allied separatist republic, including some very strict methods.

For the elections taking place on October 3, 2004, the Kremlin expressed its sympathies very clearly and supported then prime minister, Raul Khajimba. Only a month before the elections, on August 29, 2004, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, personally met Raul Khajimba in Sochi, discussing the issues of social assistance for veterans of the Second World War living in Abkhazia and cooperation between veterans' organizations. The topic of the discussion was not of much significance; however, the important fact here was the meeting itself. By holding a meeting with Khajimba, Putin gave a hint to the population of Abkhazia that the Kremlin wanted to see Khajimba become president. Photos of Putin and Khajimba together also appeared on pre-election posters. Vladislav Ardzinba's family also supported Khajimba. In August 2004, in an interview with a local newspaper, Ardzinba himself openly supported Khajimba. According to Ardzinba's statement, he had been preparing a person who would manage to boost the development and revival of Abkhazia and he believed that Khajimba was that person.<sup>4</sup> Putin and Ardzinba's support would have ensured Khajimba's success in the elections; however, the result turned out to be surprising to everyone as the Abkhazian population did not support the Kremlin's favorite. The head of the Abkhazian state company, Chernomorenergo, Sergey Baghapsh,<sup>5</sup> won the elections, enjoying the support of two major Abkhazia opposition parties, Amtskhara and United Abkhazia. Baghapsh received 59% of the votes while Khajimba managed to get only 15.4%.

In order to restore its reputation which had suffered a blow due to Khajimba's defeat, the Kremlin openly interfered in the domestic politics of Abkhazia. Khajimba appealed the issue of the election results and did not recognize his defeat which aggravated the issues of internal confrontation in Abkhazian society. Moscow, disappointed with the election results, started taking punitive actions against Abkhazia; specifically, instituting restrictions on the border with Abkhazia on November 15. On December 1, it stopped imports of agricultural products from Abkhazia, mainly citrus, which is an important segment of the Abkhazian economy and a significant source of income for the local population. On December 2, Russia used additional leverage against Abkhazia and stopped the railway connection. The restrictions of agricultural product imports and railway transportation aimed at putting pressure on Baghapsh who was planning his inauguration for December 6. Baghapsh stated that he would not give ground as a response to Russian pressure.<sup>6</sup>

In order to resolve the intra-Abkhazian confrontation and institute control over the internal political processes in Abkhazia, Moscow, parallel to using economic sanctions, took on the role of a mediator between the opposing parties and sent top officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, the General Prosecutor's Office and the Central Election Administration of Russia to Sokhumi a week before Baghapsh's inauguration. The Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Russia, Aleksandr Chekalin, headed the Kremlin's delegation. The Deputy General Prosecutor of Russia, Vladimir Kolesnikov, born in Gudauta, Abkhazia, in 1948, was also a part of the delegation.<sup>7</sup> The Kremlin supposed that Kolesnikov's connections in Abkhazia would facilitate the resolution of the confrontation in Abkhazia in a way that was beneficial for Russia.

As a result of the Kremlin's mediation attempts, the opposing parties managed to agree on the distribution of powers which also encompassed the participation of Baghapsh and Khajimba in the elections with a unified front. According to the December 6 agreement, Baghapsh became the presidential candidate while Khajimba assumed the position of the candidate to the Office of the Vice President. According to the agreement, the powers of the vice president grew significantly, almost equaling the powers of the president. The vice president would be responsible for the issues of police, defense, and security and foreign policy while also assuming the power to make appointments in these fields.<sup>8</sup>

During the January 12, 2005 elections, Baghapsh, together with Khajimba, got 90.1% of the votes while his opponent, Iakub Lakoba, managed to get just 4.5%. According to the Kremlin's calculations, Khajimba's vice presidency would restore its tarnished reputation and set limits to Baghapsh's government.

#### **Fourth Elections (2009)**

On December 12, 2009, Sergey Baghapsh and Raul Khajimba once again competed against each other in elections. Khajimba, who served as the Vice President of Abkhazia from 2005 to 2009, criticized the government and the president and resigned from his position on May 28, 2009. The reason given for his resignation was a disagreement with Baghapsh. Prior to this, six opposition groups supporting Khajimba criticized the foreign policy vector of the Baghapsh administration which they believed was creating internal-political destabilization and facilitating the growth of anti-Russian sentiments among the public.<sup>9</sup>

Baghapsh managed to win these elections (the candidate for vice president was Aleksandre Ankvab). Baghapsh received 61.16% of the votes. Khajimba lost to Baghapsh for a second time in a row, managing to get just 13.32% of the votes. Despite great sympathies from Russia towards Khajimba, in order to avoid the previous mistake, the Kremlin did not express direct support towards Khajimba and recognized the results of the elections.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Fifth Elections (2011)**

Because of the passing of Sergey Baghapsh on May 29, 2011, early elections were held on August 26, 2011. Despite the fact that the presidential candidate and Vice President, Aleksandre Ankvab, was famous for his strong character and high quality of independence, the Kremlin did not officially express its support to any other candidate. One more-or-less exceptional case, which we can suspect to have been the actions of the Kremlin taken against Ankvab, happened on August 15 when the supporters of the presidential candidate, Sergey Shamba, showed an open-air video. In the video, the former Minister of Defense of Georgia, Tengiz Kitovani, who lives in Moscow, states that Ankvab cooperated with Tbilisi during the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.<sup>11</sup> Ankvab won the elections.<sup>12</sup> He received 54.90% of the votes. Mikheil Logua was the candidate to become

vice president and ran together with Ankvab. Shamba occupied the second place (21.02%) whilst Raul Khajimba lost his third elections in a row. He received only 19.82% of the votes. It is interesting to note that the candidate for vice president, who ran together with Khajimba, was Svetlana Jergenia, Vladislav Ardzinba's widow. Khajimba and Ardzinba's family failed to get their revenge, this time due to the lack of strong support from Russia.

Several hours after the official announcement of Ankvab's victory, he received a congratulatory telephone call from the President of Russia, Dimitri Medvedev.<sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that the Kremlin did not openly try to hinder Ankvab's victory in the presidential elections, it was quite clear that Ankvab was an unacceptable partner for Moscow. The Kremlin chose to wait for the events to unfold and Ankvab's positions to weaken. In May 2014, the Kremlin decided that Ankvab and his team was against formal association with Russia and would prevent a deeper integration of Abkhazia into Russia.

At the end of May 2014, the domestic political situation in Abkhazia became very tense. Khajimba once again presented himself as a leader of the opposition, starting a campaign against Ankvab. On May 28-29, in order to resolve the Abkhazian crisis, the Assistant to the President of the Russian Federation in Social-Economic Affairs with Abkhazia and "South Ossetia" and the curator of the Georgian occupied regions, Vladislav Surkov, visited Abkhazia. Surkov was also joined by the Deputy Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, Rashid Nurgaliyev. Surkov met with representatives of the opposition in Sokhumi while his meeting with Ankvab was held in Gudauta at a Russian military base. Surkov's meeting with the opposition continued for three hours during which Khajimba and other opposition politicians presented their demands, including for Ankvab's resignation.<sup>14</sup> As a result of Surkov's personal involvement, Ankvab resigned on June 1, 2014. Surkov hailed the "peaceful resolution of the crisis" and promised Abkhazia that full financial and military support from Moscow would continue.<sup>15</sup>

After Ankvab's resignation, the Georgian speaking population of Gali was restricted from participating in the elections (with the pretext of illegal acquisition of Abkhazian passports) due to the fact that according to the belief of Khajimba's supporters, Gali was a stronghold for Khajimba's opponents. This was the very first step taken by Khajimba and his supporters towards success in the early presidential elections.



## **Sixth Elections (2014)**

The presidential elections held after Aleksandre Ankvab's resignation on August 24, 2014 were won by Raul Khajimba who managed to become president after his fourth attempt. In the given political situation, Khajimba was considered to be the most likely winner of the elections. He received 50.60% of the votes. Khajimba's candidate for vice president was Vitali Gabnia. Aslan Bzhanias, the Head of the State Security Service, was the runner-up (35.88%). Vladislav Surkov also attended Khajimba's inauguration on September 25, 2014. Very soon after the inauguration, on November 24, 2014 in Sochi, Khajimba signed an agreement about alliance and strategic partnership between Abkhazia and Russia.

## **Illegitimate Presidential Elections in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia**

Five illegitimate presidential elections have been held in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia since the end of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in 1992. Four de facto presidents have been elected in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia in this period. Similar to Abkhazia, the Kremlin's active involvement in the election processes begins during the period of Vladimir Putin's governance. In 2011, the Kremlin interfered very crudely in determining the results of the election when election results were abolished after the unexpected victory of an undesirable candidate and new elections were scheduled in which the Kremlin's favorite candidate won.

## **First Elections (1996)**

The first illegitimate presidential elections in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia were held in 1996, won by Ludwig Chibirov, who was previously the Chairman of the Supreme Council.<sup>16</sup> Before introducing the position of president, the chairpersons of the Supreme Council were the leaders of the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Chibirov served as the Chairman of the Supreme Council from 1993 until his election as president.<sup>17</sup> Chibirov received 65% of the votes in the 1996 elections while the former Prime Minister, Vladislav Gabaraev, received 20%.

## **Second Elections (2001)**

Despite the support from Moscow, Ludwig Chibirov lost the November 18, 2001 presidential elections. Eduard Kokoity, a newly returned businessman from Moscow, won the first round of voting.<sup>18</sup> In the first round, Kokoity received 45% of the votes while Chibirov received only 21%, failing to make it to the second round of voting. On the December 6, 2011 second round of the presidential elections, Kokoity got 53% of the votes while his opponent, Stanislav Kochiev, received 40%. Kokoity's victory was unexpected since he did not have Russian support.<sup>19</sup> However, it must be pointed out that during Boris Yeltsin's presidency and the beginning of Putin's presidency, the Kremlin was not intervening in the elections of the separatist republics so overtly or crudely.

## **Third Elections (2006)**

In the November 12, 2006 presidential elections, Eduard Kokoity achieved an impressive victory with 98.1% of the votes. The runner-up, Leonid Tibilov, Advisor to the Plenipotentiary Representative of the de facto President in Post-Conflict Resolution Issues and who had also chaired the Joint Control Commission for the Resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict from the "South Ossetian" side, received only 0.9% of the votes. According to the existing information, Kokoity also wanted to serve as president for the third term; however, his attempts to amend the constitution proved unsuccessful. Kokoity's opponents in Tskhinvali and Moscow accused him of embezzling and appropriating the financial assistance allocated by Russia after the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. Apart from the internal opposition, it was also quite clear that the Kremlin was not favorable towards Kokoity's political plans. The Head of the Russian President's Administration, Sergey Narishkin, also spoke out against the constitutional amendments.<sup>20</sup> As a result, due to domestic and external factors, Kokoity resigned from his position as president on December 10, 2011. Prime Minister Vadim Brovtsev served as the acting de facto president until March 25, 2012.<sup>21</sup>

## **Fourth Elections (2011-2012)**

A domestic political drama unfolded after the November 13, 2011 elections where the former Minister of Education, Eduard Kokoity's

old supporter and then his critic, Alla Dzhioyeva, received 24.8% of the votes and managed to make it to the second round of voting where she received 56.74% of the votes on November 27, 2011, defeating the government's candidate, Anatoly Bibilov, who had managed to get just 40% of the votes. Bibilov was openly supported by the Russian President, Dimitri Medvedev, who had met Bibilov in the Northern Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz on November 21, 2011.<sup>22</sup> The Central Election Commission of the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia recognized the results of the second round of elections; however, the Supreme Court of the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia abolished the results as soon as November 28, citing the violation of election procedures on the part of Dzhioyeva. The parliament very quickly appointed March 2012 as the date for the new elections and banned Dzhioyeva from participating. Bibilov also refused to take part in the repeat elections.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, the repeat elections were set for March 25, 2012. The compromise figure supported by Russia became Leonid Tibilov who received 42.5% of the votes in the first round of voting and 54% in the second round on April 8, 2012.<sup>24</sup> David Sanakoyev was his opponent. Tibilov worked for the State Security Committee (KGB) of the Soviet Union from 1981, resuming his work in the de facto Security Service of the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia from 1992 to 1998. Tibilov was considered to be a candidate loyal to Russia. After assuming office, Tibilov appointed Dzhioyeva, as the winner of the annulled elections, to the position of Deputy Chairman of the Government with a special focus on social affairs in order to achieve internal stability.<sup>25</sup>

### **Fifth Elections (2017)**

The Kremlin's role in the April 9, 2017 presidential elections held in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia was very clear. Vladislav Surkov was the main producer of domestic politics during the pre-election campaigns as well as in the post-election period. Surkov's role became clear during the pre-election campaign when the presidential candidates were being selected. The main opponents were the incumbent, President Leonid Tibilov, and the Chairman of the Parliament, Anatoly Bibilov. The Kremlin did not openly express its support for any of the candidates in the pre-election period. Both candidates were in favor of the Tskhinvali Region/

South Ossetia's integration with Russia. Surkov visited Tskhinvali in February and assured Tibilov of Putin's support during their meeting. However, according to the existing information, Bibilov also received indications of support. Russia's position about the former President Kokoity was quite clear – his participation in the election was unacceptable for the Kremlin.<sup>26</sup>

Kokoity failed to register as a candidate due to the reason that he had not been permanently living in Tskhinvali for the past five years. He accused Surkov of interfering with the decision made by the Central Election Commission on March 4, 2017. Kokoity called Surkov a swindler who, according to his assessment, acted "like South Ossetia belonged to him." Kokoity accused Surkov, the President's Advisor, Aleksei Filatov, and the Head of the Division for Social-Economic Cooperation with CIS Countries and the Republics of Abkhazia and "South Ossetia," Oleg Govorun, of conspiring against him. Despite the fact that all three presidential candidates were distinguished by their loyalty to Russia, Surkov's sympathies towards the Chairman of the de facto parliament, Anatoly Bibilov, were clear. Bibilov managed to get 54.8% of the votes in the first round of voting while Tibilov got only 30%. Tibilov's defeat was unexpected for many because Tibilov met Putin in Moscow on March 21, a short time before the election and which was considered to be a full endorsement of his candidacy on the part of the Kremlin.<sup>27</sup> After the finalization of the elections and before the inauguration, Surkov personally met with the victorious Bibilov and called his victory "predictable" and "convincing."<sup>28</sup>

## General Conclusions

- The popular perception in the Georgian public that the Kremlin's support is the decisive factor in winning the illegitimate presidential elections in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia is an indication that we are not very knowledgeable about the attitudes of the people living on the occupied territories of Georgia which pushes us to make incorrect conclusions about other issues as well.
- Russia's open involvement in the de facto presidential elections in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia starts in the period of Putin's presidency when the Kremlin began trying to control both the processes in the pre-election period as well as determine the outcomes of the elections.

- Without exception, all of the candidates participating in the illegitimate presidential elections held in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia openly state their pro-Russian orientation. Despite this, however, the Kremlin tries to select a candidate who is unconditionally loyal towards Russia which will support a deeper integration into the political, military and economic space of Russia and less able of making independent political decisions.
- The candidates favored by Russia have the experience of working in the security and military fields, making it an important factor for getting the Kremlin's support. During different periods, such candidates have included Raul Khajimba, Leonid Tibilov and Anatoly Bibilov.
- Russia's open support alone is not enough for achieving success in the illegitimate presidential elections in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Despite the sympathies expressed by the Kremlin as well as by President Putin himself towards specific candidates, the candidates who were not openly supported by Russia still managed to win presidential elections in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. In this regard, the main cause of the mistakes made by the Kremlin was the incorrect assessment of the local population's attitudes and rough politics whose implementation causes the dissatisfaction among local political groups and the population.
- In the case of the victory of undesirable candidates and despite their loyalty towards Russia, the Kremlin has been trying to restore its tarnished reputation by removing them from the position of president and appointing its protégés instead. In order to achieve this goal, the Kremlin has been using both tough measures such as economic sanctions as well as diplomatic instruments such as dispatching authoritative and powerful mediators to the conflict regions.

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