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[Thus Votes South Ossetia: A Referendum the Kremlin Would Prefer to Ignore](#)



Anatoly Bibilov has become the new de-facto president of South Ossetia — a Russia-backed separatist enclave in the Caucasus that most national governments still recognise as a region of Georgia. [Speaking to the BBC before his inauguration](#), Bibilov declared himself “one hundred percent sure” that South Ossetia will become part of Russia. At the centre of his election platform was a pledge to hold a referendum on the matter, and he has eagerly sworn he will campaign in favour. But does the Kremlin actually want a formal annexation of South Ossetia?

After elections held on April 9th, Bibilov’s domestic position looks solid enough to hold the referendum. He won 54.8 percent of the vote, easily seeing off his rival Leonid Tibilov, the incumbent, who won just 30 percent. Other candidates were not even close: Alan Gagloev, a security official, gained just 11 percent of the vote; [attempts by Eduard Kokoity, a former de facto president, to re-enter South Ossetian politics were thwarted](#) and he was kept out the race — partly because of a new electoral code Kokoity himself had introduced. Votes that would have gone to Kokoity, one local observer told me, likely formed the core of Bibilov’s majority.

All the main presidential candidates promised to hold a referendum on joining Russia, which is a popular rallying cry. Research in 2014 found that [the overwhelming majority of South Ossetians would support such a move](#) — more even than in Transnistria; a referendum there in 2006 produced a majority 97.2 percent in favour of annexation, though the region remains an unrecognised state within the territory of Moldova to this day.

Bibilov vs Tibilov

Few see the rise of Bibilov as the victory of an outsider. The 47-year old Bibilov has long been a political and military heavyweight in these small, mountainous lands. Bibilov has served as a speaker in South Ossetia's parliament, a leader of the United Ossetia party, and a minister of "emergency situations." He also holds the rank of lieutenant-general, having played a key role in the separatist defence of Tskhinvali, South Ossetia's de-facto capital, during the Russo-Georgian war of 2008.

At the height of that conflict, Russian tanks then rolled to within striking distance of Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. Following the war — against the objections of Georgia and much of the international community — Russia recognised South Ossetia as an independent state. To this day, only Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru have followed suit. In the face of otherwise complete isolation, South Ossetia's tiny population of 50,000 largely use Russian passports and Russian phone numbers.

International observers have warned that Bibilov's declared intention for South Ossetia to join Russia on a more official basis could be a logical next step of an inexorable Russian land grab that has been happening for years in slow motion. Yet it is worth bearing in mind that the Kremlin's favoured candidates frequently argue against formal absorption into Russia. Back in 2011 Alla Dzhioyeva, a former education minister and an opponent of any formal Russian annexation of South Ossetia ran in presidential elections and won.

In 2012, South Ossetia's Supreme Court invalidated these results, citing electoral fraud. Another election was held and Dzhioyeva was barred from the re-run. On that occasion, Tibilov triumphed and served out a turbulent five year term.

Tibilov was not initially a preferred choice of the Kremlin. His stance was in favour of being annexed into Russia. But he won greater approval from the Kremlin as time went by, largely owing to his tone becoming more measured and pragmatic on the issue after taking office.

This in turn left an opening for Bibilov this time round, who has consistently called for joining Russia on a formal basis. Tibilov's moderation, while less compelling for voters, won a consolation prize: a partial endorsement from the Kremlin. He secured, most notably, a meeting with President Vladimir Putin two weeks before the South Ossetians headed to the polls, and Putin wished him "good luck". Bibilov had to settle for an audience with Valentina Matviyenko, the head of the Federation Council.

That partial endorsement did not stop Bibilov winning. Taking a zealous position on holding a referendum has been a cornerstone of Bibilov's political platform since the founding of the United Ossetia party in 2012 — and an electoral gold mine. His party won a majority of seats in the 2014 parliamentary elections, when annexation was also a popular talking point. Partly this is because absorption would unify South Ossetia with North Ossetia, which is in Russia. While parliamentary elections in 2014 were also dominated by the joining Russia question, and politicians were arguably given a mandate to call a referendum then and there, [both Bibilov and Tibilov agreed to postpone a referendum until 2017](#), after their April presidential election campaigns.

After all, they claimed, both wanted to put different referendum questions to the electorate: Bibilov supported a simple vote: "Yes!" or "No!". Tibilov wanted a more constitutional approach, a question of the electorate's consent to amend article ten of the republic's de-facto constitution, which would to allow the president to request annexation by a foreign state. Last April, the outgoing president also aired the idea of forming a supranational "union state" between Russia and South Ossetia. Among voters, after these elections, Bibilov's directness seems to be the more popular approach.

Whatever the intricacies of their proposals, it is clear that [calls for annexation have a long and ignoble history](#); most South Ossetian politicians will happily cynically reverse course at any given time to stay in the Kremlin's

good graces. In any case, South Ossetia's ever-deepening dependence on Russia gives Moscow the levers to postpone formal annexation almost indefinitely.

Informal Control

After all, Moscow's control runs deep without any need for formalities. South Ossetia still has its own internal political dynamics worthy of note, but managing them is made easier due to South Ossetia's dependence on Russian financial and military assistance: 8.2 of 8.9 billion roubles in the 2016 budget was provided by the Kremlin.

In recent years, Moscow has tried to stop so much of it being embezzled by local elites. In fact, this was one possible reason for the integration of South Ossetia's small military into the Russian armed forces this March, on the provision that South Ossetian soldiers kept their ranks and were not deployed outside the territory. [Leaked emails from Vladislav Surkov further exposed the extent of Russian control](#) over South Ossetia's governing structures — in one remarkable example, Moscow apparently maintains 13 special working groups to review legislation drafted by the de-facto authorities in Tskhinvali, and even provides their South Ossetian colleagues with a timetable for the laws' approval. South Ossetian government ministries are stacked with Russian and Russian-born officials. A treaty in 2013 mandated that South Ossetian and Russian laws be harmonised, and a further [memorandum on integration in March 2015](#) formalised these ongoing trends. Tskhinvali has agreed to host a Russian military presence for 99 years — there are around 3,000 Russian soldiers stationed in South Ossetia, who already patrol its ([ominously southwards shifting](#)) line of contact with Georgia.

Why bother with formalities?

So Russia is already absorbing South Ossetia, just informally. The Kremlin has little need to formally annex the territory in order to exercise control over it. While a formalising of Russian involvement and control might not be unwelcome, it's at the very least a gamble with few clear dividends for Moscow. Besides, it needlessly throws away a bargaining chip with Georgia, however remote the idea would be of Russia — or South Ossetians — allowing Georgian governance to return.

This attitude contrasts with Russia's annexation of Crimea, which brought international opprobrium, but it had clear domestic support and put Russia's beleaguered liberal opposition in a twist. Crimea has a place in Russian statist-nationalist rhetoric which South Ossetia has never enjoyed — it would be difficult to whip up a wave of patriotism in Russian society on the back of a "reunion" with South Ossetia.

Equally, there are other players in the region for Russia to consider. As Olga Allenova recently [noted in Kommersant](#), Armenia is Russia's only military ally in the South Caucasus region, and Yerevan has strong economic ties to Moscow. Thousands of Armenian workers pass through Georgia every year on their way north. This means a need to stay in at least some basic form of contact with Georgia. Taking formal control of South Ossetia would plunge those relations to new lows for limited gains. Whether the Kremlin would risk such a high-stakes, low-gain move remains to be seen — though it almost certainly won't be seen before 2018, when Putin faces a presidential (re)election.

These elections in South Ossetia were held alongside a decision on affixing the name "Alania" to the de-facto state, following the example of North Ossetia, a neighbouring republic in the Russian North Caucasus which is also inhabited by an Ossetian majority. As South Ossetia's absorption by Russia is often framed by local officials instead as the "union of South and North Ossetia within the Russian Federation", the move is also a symbolic gesture towards annexation. It's also possibly a conciliatory one, writes Caucasus scholar Sergey Markedonov, a way of reassuring South Ossetians of their trajectory towards Moscow. It is one that costs little more than [irritating neighbouring ethnic groups in the North Caucasus](#) (for not only Ossetians claim descent from the ancient kingdom of Alania).

We seem to live in an age of controversial referendums. And perhaps South Ossetia is ahead of the curve — [Tskhinvali loves them](#). In 1992, South Ossetians voted against the dissolution of the Soviet Union, one of the first steps in a bloody war against Georgia. In 2006, they voted in an independence referendum — though neither was recognised by the international community.

Whether South Ossetia does formally “unite” with Russia is ultimately not the electorate’s decision to make. Despite jubilation on the streets and his own lofty goals, neither is it Bibilov’s.

Abkhazian Reluctance

Abkhazia also signed an agreement on “strategic partnership” with Russia in 2014 — to less public acclaim. Abkhazia’s internal politics are by far the most [politically fractious](#) of Eurasia’s de-facto states, and relations with Russia are no exception. Although it wouldn’t take much imagination to see Abkhazia’s de-facto President Raul Khadjimba one day take his place among Russia’s regional governors, a majority of all ethnic groups in the breakaway state said they would oppose such a move in a 2014 opinion poll. Indeed, the authorities in Sukhum(i) have consistently refused to liberalise laws on foreign (i.e. Russian) ownership of local real estate — much to Moscow’s chagrin.

In effect, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are both stuck in the Kremlin’s waiting room. Abkhazia is there with reluctance, largely unwilling to surrender independence; South Ossetia is there with impatience, eager to trade off sovereignty for a “unification” with fellow descendants from the ancient kingdom of Alania.

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