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DUELING BANJOS: PARALLEL ELECTIONS AND PARALLEL PRESIDENTS IN SOUTH OSSETIA

By *Kakha Jibladze* (12/13/2006 issue of the CACI Analyst)

On November 12, the people of the unrecognized South Ossetia participated in two equally unrecognized elections and referendums. As a result, the conflicted territory now boasts two de facto presidents and their respective governments: Eduard Kokoity, the winner of the de facto election in the Tskhinvali region and other parts of the territory, and Sanakoev, who received votes from the Georgian-controlled part of the territory.

According to analysts close to the peace negotiations, Sanakoev represents a solution to a long-standing problem: while Kokoity boasts the support of the Ossetian population, there was no forum for the Georgian population which remains in the territory of the former Soviet Autonomous Region of South Ossetia. The contested territory is a literal chessboard of Georgian and Ossetian villages with no clear majority for either side. Adding to the mix are the Ossetians who remained in Georgia proper, the Ossetians who fled Georgia all together and the Ossetians who are against Kokoity and his proposed plans to join North Ossetia and the Russian Federation.

One of Sanakoev's victories was to prove that not everyone in South Ossetia supports Kokoity. The problem with his claim – as well as Kokoity's claim that he received nearly 100 percent of the vote in his "own" elections – is that there has been no way to independently verify the results of either election.

According to Kokoity's government, 90% of the estimated 55,000 eligible voters – which includes approximately 10,000 living in Russia's North Ossetia – participated in that election. The Sanakoev team maintains that their voter turnout was equally high in their elections: 42,000 ballots. However, the estimated number of people living in South Ossetia is roughly 70,000 according to a 2000 census.

Despite confusion over the exact number of potential – and actual – participants in either election, analysts believe that the very fact the alternative election could take place at all is proof that a reasonable number of people living in the contested territory do not support Kokoity.

Sanakoev, who based his alternative election campaign in the mixed Georgian-Ossetian village of Akhalgori, is widely considered to be Tbilisi's man in South Ossetia. Although he was only officially named the second unofficial president of South Ossetia a week ago, both his election campaign and his platform to date largely reflect the peace plan promoted by Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili and his government.

So far, officially Tbilisi has refrained from openly supporting Sanakoev. By virtue of the conflict, the Georgian government cannot recognize either de facto president: Kokoity or Sanakoev. However Merab Antadze, the state minister for conflict resolution, attending Sanakoev's inauguration this month and has publicly stated that the Georgian government is willing to listen to anyone who represents the South Ossetian population. It is worth noting that Russian officials attended Kokoity's inauguration in November.

While members of Sanakoev's newly founded de facto government – thought to be based in the Georgian controlled village of Kurta which is located a few kilometers north of the Kokoity-controlled capital of Tskhinvali – have regularly spoken to the Georgian and international media over the past few weeks, the de facto president himself has remained silent. In interviews he generally repeats that he is "for peace and stability" in the conflict zone. His government has also promised to improve economic growth in the poverty-stricken region. How and when he plans to accomplish this has not been revealed.

As long as Sanakoev remains silent, he is an easy target for anti-Georgian sentiment within – and outside – the conflict zone and a potentially dangerous figure for Tbilisi. However, his presence in South Ossetia has already paid some rewards: on December 4, during the OSCE ministerial conference in Brussels, both the EU and the US spoke out in favor of a stronger OSCE presence in South Ossetia, an indirect attack against the purported Russian-led peacekeeping force in the region.

However, if Sanakoev reneges on his promises and does not aid the peace process or improve the economic situation in South Ossetia, his perceived alliance with Tbilisi could backfire on the Georgian government as it attempts to rebuild bridges between itself and the population of South Ossetia.