

MOSCOW'S FINGERPRINTS ALL OVER SOUTH OSSETIA'S REFERENDUM

by Vladimir Socor

On November 12 the Russian-installed authorities in South Ossetia held a referendum and “presidential” election in the portions of territory under their control. The balloting returned the de facto president, Eduard Kokoiti, to office for another term; and produced a “yes” answer to the question: “Do you agree that the Republic of South Ossetia should retain its current status as an independent state and be recognized by the international community?”

The final returns, issued on November 14 by the de facto authorities, claim a 95% turnout, a 98% vote for Kokoiti (three other pro-secession candidates are credited with 2% between them), and a 99.9% “yes” vote on the referendum question. Russian and local managers of this exercise claim that 82,000 people currently reside in South Ossetia, that 55,000 voters reside in secessionist-controlled territory, and that 52,000 of them actually voted -- a set of clearly inflated figures (South Ossetian Press and Information Committee website, Interfax, November 14).

In South Ossetia's previous referendum, held on January 19, 1992, the authorities had claimed a totally implausible 97% turnout and 99.75% vote for secession from Georgia and joining Russia. In fact, almost a third of South Ossetia's population is Georgian and as such disenfranchised by the de facto authorities.

The question of South Ossetia's accession to the Russian Federation was not on the ballot this time, although South Ossetian de facto leaders have many times declared this goal. Indeed they often mention the difference between Abkhazia, which has not yet chosen “independence” or accession to Russia, and the case of South Ossetia, which has simply and openly sought accession to the Russian Federation.

However, a series of statements from Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and leading Russian parliamentarians explained before and in the aftermath of the November 12 referendum why the question was worded with relative caution. The main goal at this stage, according to these statements, is to obtain international recognition or at least acceptance of South Ossetia's “independence” (as Moscow dubs the secession from Georgia). Such recognition or acceptance would create a new basis for negotiations with Georgia and within international organizations regarding South Ossetia's political status (Interfax, November 7 through 14).

While conceding that such a referendum would not lead to international recognition automatically or any time soon, Moscow's official statements underscore that the referendum's “results can not be ignored” by the international community and “must be taken into account” in the negotiations to follow. Using this reasoning, Moscow staged the referendum at its initiative, not a local one, although the de facto authorities stepped forward in carrying it out.

If international acceptance was the goal, the exercise fell short. The European Union (at several levels), the United States, and top officials of NATO, the OSCE, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe rejected this referendum and election as undemocratic and invalid. Nevertheless, the holding of this referendum will certainly provide Russia and its local protégés with the rationale to become even more intransigent in the negotiations, which was the referendum's true rationale in the first place.

Real local power in South Ossetia is concentrated in the hands of several carpetbagger-type delegates from Russia. Kokoiti, who is at least a local Ossetian, spent a decade in St. Petersburg as a wrestler-turned-businessman before returning to Tskhinvali as Russia's nominee for "president." The other Moscow-assigned power holders include: "prime minister" Yuri Morozov; armed forces commander General Anatoly Barankevich (his nominally South Ossetian units are largely staffed from Russia's North Ossetia); and the chief of South Ossetia's KGB (still so named), Boris Atoyev, hitherto in Russia's KGB and Federal Security Service in Kabardino-Balkaria and in Moscow, who took over in Tskhinvali from his Russian colleague Nikolai Dolgopolov in the run-up to the referendum (South Ossetian Press and Information Committee website, Interfax, November 9, 14).

In its series of statements evaluating the referendum (Interfax, November 10-14), Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes it as a "free expression of the will of South Ossetia's people through democratic procedures." It claims, "Many countries in Europe and America could only envy the level of organization and democratic transparency" in South Ossetia. And it insists that it must be taken into account internationally as indicating "the people's free choice." This latter thesis is becoming a central one in Moscow's position, also reflecting Russia's own understanding of democracy.

Moscow's official assessment of the referendum cites the evaluation by "international observers" whom Moscow itself invited to South Ossetia. Such observers included six Russian Duma deputies as well as members of the pro-Kremlin youth organization Nashi, who conveniently took charge of the "exit poll."

Modest Kolerov, head of the Russian Presidential Administration's Directorate for Interregional Ties, mobilized his emergent international front organizations to observe and bless the voting. The titles of these groups -- seemingly designed to appeal to a broad range of potential sympathizers -- range from "Bloc of European Leftist Parties-Anti Imperialist Camp" to a "Free Europe Foundation" and include the "Community for Democracy and Rights of Peoples" -- a Kolerov-sponsored association of the post-Soviet secessionist enclaves. Kolerov's subordinate, Oleg Sapozhnikov, headed the international press center that was set up in Tskhinvali specially for this event. Sapozhnikov also organized the press center in Tiraspol for the referendum held two months ago in Transnistria.

In his immediate post-election statements (Interfax, November 13, 14), Kokoiti has interpreted the alleged outcome as reflecting a "choice for independence and integration

with Russia,” as well as a “first step toward South Ossetia’s unification with North Ossetia,” evidently within Russia.

Kokoiti also termed the Georgian-inhabited areas around Tskhinvali as “inalienable parts of South Ossetia.” However, those Georgians, along with a number of local Ossetians, took part in a parallel referendum against secession, the returns of which are due to be issued as well.