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SOUTH OSSETIA: AFTERMATH AND OUTLOOK

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Russia's decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries has given rise to numerous comparisons between these two former Georgian autonomous regions, examining the road each has traveled and the current situation. The events of August 2008 had a different impact in each of the two republics, but nevertheless put them in the same group, a group earlier joined by Nagorno-Karabakh and Trans-Dniester. And yet there are just as many differences as similarities between the two. The main similarity of course is that these two republics emerged out of the Soviet Union's collapse, but their fates took different paths and this remains the case today and will most likely be so in the future too.

The different attitude that Russia has traditionally shown towards each of them played a big part in creating this situation. Russia's role in Abkhazia was more akin to that of evil stepmother, or at least biased investigator in the 1990s, whereas Moscow was always ready to show a smiling face to South Ossetia. True, this smile was not always sincere and the seeming friendship could mask indifference, but it nonetheless influenced the situation, and Russia now declares itself South Ossetia's ally, friend and protector. But over the almost two-and-half years that have passed since Russia officially recognized South Ossetia's independence neither Tskhinvali nor Moscow have clearly outlined the goals of a new state project or set out the scenarios and mechanisms for its further development.

The Abkhazians always stated the clear goal of building an independent state, even if within close union with Russia, but the South Ossetians pursued the goal of unification with the Ossetians on Russia's northern side of the border, within the Russian Federation. Up until Russia's recognition of independence, Abkhazia was making efforts in several directions and had several partners (in particular Turkey and the Abkhaz-Adygean diaspora abroad), even if Russia was the main partner. In South Ossetia, on the other hand, Russia was and is the only direction and only partner. But there is also a distinctive feature in the form of the intermediary role that North Ossetia-Alania plays between Moscow and Tskhinvali.

Transforming South Ossetia into nothing more than a sort of big military base for Russia, with an economy producing nothing of its own and focused entirely on servicing the military contingents' needs is no productive economy would be an unacceptable and dead-end scenario.

Russia's recognition of independence is not the only factor shaping the domestic political situation in South Ossetia today. Other factors are internal and include the parliamentary election that took place on May 31, 2009, and the presidential election scheduled for the end of 2011. These factors have had an impact on the relations between the newly recognized republic's political elites. The August 2008 events enabled current President Eduard Kokoity to strengthen and consolidate his position and squeeze out of the republic a number of influential figures of questionable loyalty towards him. Kokoity sometimes gave the impression, however, of building a new opposition with his very own hands. Former parliamentary speaker Znaur Gassiyev, a respected figure in the republic, was sidelined from active political life. Anatoly Barankevich, secretary of the South Ossetian Security Council, who made a positive name for himself during the August 2008 events, caused a stir when he departed the republic, and former deputy speaker Tarzan Kokoity failed to secure a place for himself in the new power deal too. The People's Party led by Roland Kelekhsayev, a politician who never seemed to have far-reaching ambitions, joined the opposition. Reacting to the problems that arose in building a gas pipeline through the republic, Albert Dzhussoyev, general director of company Stroiprogress, also joined the opposition and gave it a substantial part of its funding.

As was to be expected, the opposition began to consolidate around this same Dzhussoyev in 2009. Along with Kelekhsayev and Barankevich, it was joined by Vyacheslav Gobozov, the more ambitious leader of opposition party Fydybast, former republic prosecutor Akhsar Kochiyev, banker Leonid Tibilov, former Prime Minister Yury Morozov, who now works for Stroiprogress, Dzhabolat Tedeyev, chief trainer of Russia's national wrestling team, another former prime minister, Oleg Teziyev, who now heads the Civic Initiative Fund and works on the Russian Federation Council staff, and Anatoly Chekhoyev, former deputy chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee on CIS Affairs and Relations with Compatriots Abroad. The opposition forum in Moscow on October 9, 2009, was one of the milestones in bringing the disparate groups and figures together, although they lacked a single charismatic leader, even if Gobozov looked to be trying to claim this role for himself. The only real thing uniting the opposition was the demand for an early presidential election. Nevertheless, the opposition still has considerable potential clout, as the number of people unhappy with the South Ossetian authorities' actions is not growing any smaller. One of the biggest complaints is low wages. The minimum wage in the republic was a mere 907 roubles at the start of spring this year, and the average wage was 3,700 roubles a month. High prices (most consumer goods and products are imported from Russia) and mass unemployment were other big complaints.

The delays in Tskhinvali's reconstruction and building the Dzaurikau-Tskhinvali gas pipeline, Russia's refusal to finance a number of the projects announced, and mass embezzlement of humanitarian aid have all helped to win the opposition support and sent Kokoity's popularity into decline. Furthermore, a number of figures who have compromised themselves occupy too visible a place in South Ossetia's power system right now. Surveys from the end of 2009 show that 73% of South Ossetians considered the social and political situation in the republic complicated, and 75.7% were unhappy with the pace of rebuilding work.

The Russian leadership's attempts to establish effective control over South Ossetia's authorities and prevent funds from being embezzled have not been successful so far. A number of senior officials appointed at Moscow's wishes have proved unable to control the financial flows. The problem is that the prime minister and ministers have always been more or less decorative figures in the South Ossetian power system, with real control of the financial flows in the hands of Kokoity personally and his entourage. It is true, however, that the presence of a number of capable and uncompromised politicians in Kokoity's team does have a balancing effect.

The appointment of Vadim Brovtsev as prime minister, who immediately brought in this team, dubbed the 'Ozersk team' in South Ossetia (after the Chelyabinsk Region town of Ozersk, from

which Brovtsev comes) was an attempt to create a sort of counterweight to Kokoity. The arrival of Brovtsev, who had Moscow's clear support, dramatically cut Kokoity's chances to embezzle in uncontrolled impunity Russian financial aid, both budget aid and money for the reconstruction work. Brovtsev also launched a real information war (in the Russian media and the internet) against the South Ossetian leadership and Kokoity personally, and this was probably his big mistake. He earned himself the dislike of a large number of politically active people in South Ossetia (and not only among Kokoity's supporters), who accuse Brovtsev and his team of being indifferent towards the republic and using management methods that create corruption and increase the disparities in society.

There is a stereotype that South Ossetia is completely corrupt. In reality, a large amount of the money stolen vanishes while it is still in the ministries and agencies in Moscow, or once it reaches the prime minister's team, and little more than kopecks actually reach the South Ossetian officials. There have been some notorious cases, such as the purchase of expensive Dutch combine harvesters that cannot be serviced in the republic, and sky-high fees for lecturers invited from Moscow.

Another of the myths spread by those hostile to Kokoity is the supposedly total lack of qualified human resources in the republic and the need to therefore bring them from Russia. This applies to everyone from construction workers to government ministers. At the same time, the republic faces rising unemployment, made worse by the Russian Defence Ministry's initiative to reduce the South Ossetian army from 2,800 to 200 servicemen. No program to help the laid-off servicemen find new jobs has been put in place, which is pushing some of them at least into a marginalized situation. With unemployment at this level, and given the labor shortage in the republic, it would make sense to establish a system for training South Ossetians in Russia under preferential conditions and guaranteeing their return home to work. There is a quota system in place, but it has not been effective so far.

The battle going on between Kokoity's and Brovtsev's teams is inevitably slowing down and complicating the reconstruction work. The biggest problem is that there is still no strategy drawn up for South Ossetia's economic development as a country, even if one doomed to be dependent on Russian financial aid for a long time yet to come. This situation is made worse by the legislative vacuum. The main Russian legal codes are formally in force in South Ossetia, including the Russian Tax Code, but these codes were drafted for a country far different in size and scale than South Ossetia.

The prime minister's team has still not decided whether to put the focus on developing the local agriculture sector or whether it is cheaper to simply import produce from Russia. Insufficient attention is paid to the human resources issue, and there has not been any inventory of land carried out. The republic's government wants to focus on producing construction materials and the tourism sector, but loses sight of the biggest problem – lack of transport and communication routes. It is well known that the strategic Trans-Caucasus Highway is the only guarantee of South Ossetia's survival. South Ossetia would not exist as we know it today without this road. The economic crisis put an end to talk of building an airport north of Tskhinvali. The project to build a parallel road further west of the Trans-Caucasus Highway (via Kvaisu and the Mamison Gorge) has also been put aside for better times. The situation has been improved somewhat by the fact that a road was laid during the gas pipeline's construction that doubles the Trans-Caucasus route (thus providing a duplicate route in the event of a terrorist attack) and is suitable for rough-terrain vehicles. It is a much bigger priority for the republic at the moment to build high quality roads from Tskhinvali to Kvaisu and Leningori. But this still does nothing to resolve the main problem – the fact that it is not profitable to transport any produce from South Ossetia to the Russian market. The most realistic solution would be to build a railway line, but the economic crisis has meant forgetting about this project too for now.

Another of the problems hampering South Ossetia's economic development is the fairly stringent border control regime between the republic and Russia. This situation is worsened by the fact that the border zone with North Ossetia, which has particular rules governing entry, movement and economic activity, is deep within Russian territory and covers almost the entire mountainous area in the region. The need to get any form of economic activity approved with the border guards creates fertile soil for corruption. Reducing these border rules and formalities would give new impetus to the Zaramaga district's development (Zaramaga Hydroelectric Power Station), which would give a big boost to economic growth in both North and South Ossetia.

Tskhinvali's big problem at the moment is insufficient and vulnerable water supply. When Georgian forces blockaded the city in 2008 the water supply situation all but brought about a total collapse in the city's life, as residents formed queues to collect water from the handful springs on the city outskirts. New reservoirs need to be built now and old water supply pipes replaced. Several projects have been put forward for thorough overhaul of the city's water supply system, but none of them are being implemented as yet. In the longer term, given that South Ossetia is a mountainous region, it would make sense to develop hydroelectricity there and build a series of small-scale hydroelectric power stations, for example.

The Russian media have followed the lead of Kokoity's opponents in creating the impression that no progress whatsoever has been made in rebuilding the republic, but this is not the case in reality. More than 80% of the roofing of apartment blocks has been repaired, a new mini-district, Moskovsky District, has been built, and roads are being repaired, including the South-Ossetian stretch of the Trans-Caucasus Highway. But Tskhinvali's symbolic buildings – the parliament and the university – which were burned by Georgian forces in August 2008, continue to lie in ruins. Not all residents have received the meager financial compensation they were supposed to get for their destroyed homes. At the end of 2008, Russia promised to allocate South Ossetia 11.5 billion rubles for rebuilding, but then, citing the crisis, reduced this figure to 7-8 billion rubles. Estimates suggest, however, that only 1.5-2 billion rubles actually reached the republic.

Another big issue in the republic in terms of social-economic and political implications was Tskhinvali's establishment of jurisdiction over the main part of the Leningori (Akhlagori) district in 2008 (previously, the district's western part with the village of Tsinagar as its center was under Tskhinvali's jurisdiction). Integrating the remaining Georgian population, above all in the Leningori district, into South Ossetian society remains a big problem. The main conditions for successful integration are guaranteed safety and education opportunities, including using the Georgian language in education, but with compulsory study of Russia and preferably Ossetian too. If these conditions are not fulfilled young people from the Leningori district will not remain in South Ossetia or will go to Georgia to seek their education. It is also very important to guarantee that Georgians who hold the proper passport can take part in elections in South Ossetia. The Georgian authorities are obviously trying to lure ethnic Georgians, especially those in Leningori district, out of South Ossetia, offering them free homes and providing compensation and humanitarian aid, while the South Ossetian leadership is doing practically nothing to oppose this policy. The businesses that were working in Leningori up until August 2008 have been closed, public sector pensions and wages are often substantially delayed, the district does not receive Ossetian television, and the Ossetian mobile phone provider's coverage is unreliable in the district. As a result, according to current data, 40% of the ethnic Ossetian population left the district in 2008-2009. At the same time, people from Dagestan, coming to work on construction sites, are settling in the republic, which in the long term could rise to the emergence of Muslim communities in South Ossetia. Change in the republic's ethnic and religious makeup could eventually lead to new conflicts emerging.

Most people in South Ossetia support the idea of seeing the republic join the Russian Federation anytime in the near future. In Gobozev's words, those who urge such a step and declare it necessary

are driven by “fear, inability, and lack of desire to build their own country”. There has been a rise in support for real South Ossetian independence of late among the general public and opposition figures. The dominant idea in the South Ossetian political elite today is that now that the republic has been recognized as a sovereign state the question of joining Russia is off the agenda and efforts should concentrate now on consolidating the republic’s independence.

Another trend has also emerged however: consolidation between the South Ossetian opposition and part of the North Ossetian elite around the idea of building a unified and independent Ossetian state. Part of the North Ossetian elite sees Russia’s recognition of South Ossetia as a chance to build a truly independent country for the first time in several centuries, uniting the Ossetian people (which they see as one people). This section of the elite is not anti-Russian in any way, but the logic of events could potentially bring them to the idea of actually building an independent Ossetian state, uniting South and North Ossetia outside the Russian Federation.

This looks like a very unrealistic scenario however, in large part because the North Ossetian political and economic elite’s interests do not necessarily coincide with those of people in South Ossetia. We should not overlook the business interests of part of the North Ossetian elite, who have always had strong economic ties with Georgia and make good dividends from customs duties. This section of the elite’s interests coincides with Georgian interests, as both attempt to prevent South Ossetian products from entering the Russian market.

Over the last 10-15 years, the North Ossetian political elite has been prey to certain phobias over settling on a development vector, and this is partly shaped by economic factors, no doubt. Paradoxically, the North Ossetian political elite, unlike the general North Ossetian public, were stubbornly opposed for a long time to Russian recognition of South Ossetia’s independence. Even after the brief conflict of 2004 and the increased tension in South Ossetia, they thought that deciding the region’s fate would take decades, and talk of South Ossetia joining the Russian Federation looked completely unrealistic in their eyes. People among the elite in Vladikavkaz at that time saw the solution to the conflict in encouraging trans-border cooperation between the neighboring Russian and Georgian regions, with the hope that South Ossetia would eventually be integrated into this overall picture too.

It is important here to note the historical differences in mentality between the North and South Ossetians and the inevitable ‘little brother’ role that the South Ossetians would have in a unified Ossetia (similar to the situation of Soviet-era Ingushetia within the Checheno-Ingush Republic). The North Ossetian authorities always feared that if the two regions united, the north would have to give up some profitable posts to more active and mobile people from the south. All of these factors make it clear that the South Ossetian elite would not accept unification of North and South Ossetia as a single republic within the Russian Federation, and for the North Ossetian elite this would be a dangerous path to take. Another possibility discussed in South Ossetian political circles was that the republic could join Russia as a separate republic, but Russia’s international obligations and the situation in the Caucasus region make this option out of the question for Moscow (it is one thing to recognize the independence of a new country formed out of the territory of another country that is a UN member, but quite another thing to annex part of this country’s territory). South Ossetia’s joining Russia would set a precedent not only in the post-Soviet area but in Europe as a whole, and the consequences would be extremely serious for Russia’s foreign policy. But in the right circumstances this scenario could possibly go ahead, for example, if a major crisis or armed conflict broke out in the Caucasus, in which Russia was not a direct participant. Overall, despite the various scenarios, South Ossetia will probably have to work on the basis of independence in its current political form over the coming future.

As the 2011 presidential election draws closer, the issue of the republic’s future development path is becoming more and more pressing, but the main question is who will replace Kokoity, who is

coming to the end of his second term as head of South Ossetia. The arrival of an opposition leader in power would inevitably intensify the battles between clans and increase tension in the republic, whether the opposition wants this or not. The most promising candidates could be politicians who are part of Kokoity's team but at the same time have managed to hold on to a large measure of independence.

Kokoity's entourage voiced the idea on a number of occasions of changing the republic's constitution by means of referendum. This would have required Moscow's approval, and during the wait for this approval, even ambiguous statements from Kokoity's entourage looked like hopeful signals. The thing to remember here is that in their state-building efforts, the South Ossetian elite is copying the Russian and North Ossetian bureaucratic systems, although with its small population and shortage of personnel, a lighter and more mobile model would be better suited to the republic's needs.

Moscow did not react immediately, but during the summer of 2010 made it clear to Kokoity that any change to the constitution – essentially a violation of the constitution – and attempt to gain a third term would be unacceptable. The Georgian (or Russian) model of expanding the prime minister's powers and having Kokoity move into this post after his presidential term expires is also not an option. This is above all because the current prime minister is not someone from Kokoity's team but was appointed by Moscow, and the South Ossetian president is hardly likely to want to expand this appointee's powers. The South Ossetian parliament also categorically opposes this scenario, as does the republic's political elite. At the congress of presidential party Unity this summer, Kokoity said that a third presidential term is out of the question for him. This has greatly raised the chances of opposition candidates Stanislav Kochiyev (leader of the South Ossetian communist party) and Vyacheslav Gobozov (leader of Fydybasta party). Other political forces have also stepped up their activity.

At first glance the upcoming presidential election looked set to follow the very simple scenario of a candidate from the 'party of power' – in other words, Kokoity's appointed successor – against several candidates from the opposition, who, as usual, will not be able to agree and put forward a single candidate. But even with the election still some way away it is already clear that this scenario is not going to work. First, South Ossetia does not have a unified 'party of power'. South Ossetia's Unity party cannot be seen as a clone of Russia's United Russia. Its leader is not especially popular in society, and there are divisions between the various political and economic groups that form it. The lack of unity among the ruling elite has opened the road to greatly increased chances for a bigger number of potential candidates. One 'face-saving' option in this situation that has been proposed is the unrealistic idea of putting forward several figures as potential 'successors', one of whom would actually run in the election in the end, while the others withdraw their candidacies. But in this scenario fierce battles between the candidates would be unavoidable, and there would be the risk too of losing control over rivals.

Kokoity began considering at least three politicians as potential successors this last summer: leader of the Unity Party Zurab Kokoyev; Member of Parliament and director of a bread factory Vadim Tskhovrebov; and Prosecutor General Taimuraz Khugayev. Of these three, only Tskhovrebov and Khugayev, both experienced and firm-handed managers, could carry out the main mission of keeping power in the hands of Kokoity's team and maintaining stability in the republic. Both are totally loyal to Kokoity and his team's nucleus. Furthermore, Khugayev is also a close relative of Kokoity (Kokoity's brother, Robert Kokoity, South Ossetia's ambassador to Abkhazia, is married to Khugayev's sister). If Moscow agrees to this 'successor operation' and does not impose any particular candidate on Kokoity, Tskhovrebov and Khugayev would have good chances of becoming the next president. The administrative resources in the president's hands could be enough to neutralize possible attempts to compromise the future candidate, and ensure the final goal is reached.

As for Unity leader Zurab Kokoyev, he had become an increasing irritant in the eyes of Kokoity's entourage, not least because of his unsanctioned and often ill-considered contacts with representatives of the Moscow authorities. In short, Kokoyev's attempts to play his own political game have not been a success. Furthermore, Kokoyev is not much of a speaker and remains very much tainted in the public's eyes by corruption scandals dating back to his time as mayor of Tskhinvali.

Something of an alliance has been emerging in South Ossetian ruling circles between parliamentary speaker Stanislav Kochiyev, Unity leader Kokoyev, and Prime Minister Vadim Brovtsev. This is an alliance between politicians pursuing very different goals and united only in their desire to oppose Kokoity. The fact that at least two of the politicians in this alliance harbour presidential ambitions of their own makes it all the more unstable. Kochiyev, the communist party leader, positions himself in the opposition, though he is not actually connected to the 'traditional' opposition. As parliamentary speaker he is connected to the current government and is forced to share with it the responsibility for mistakes made.

South Ossetia's ambassador to Russia, Dmitry Medoyev, belongs to the 'party of power' in formal terms, but is actually independent. Medoyev, however, has been in Moscow for the last ten years at least, making only brief visits to South Ossetia, and people have 'forgotten' him there. Another factor that could be potentially used against him is his past closeness to the group formed around well-known South Ossetian nationalist Alan Chochiyev, which represents an independent opposition current firmly opposed to both the North Ossetian and South Ossetian leaderships.

The opposition is still grouped around Dzambolat Tedeyev and Albert Dzhussoyev, both of whom live in Moscow but have close ties with South Ossetia. Given the potential risks involved, the opposition plans to put forward several people as candidates. Gobofov will probably not be able to get registered as a candidate for failing to meet the residency requirement of 10 years. The point has been made repeatedly that just having one's official registered address [propiska] in South Ossetia is not sufficient proof of actual residency in the republic. But with Gobofov out of the running, the opposition would be left without a single charismatic leader able to win over the voters. Dzhussoyev, even if he wanted to run, would not be able to because he does not meet the residency requirements, and the same goes for European wrestling champion Tedeyev, one of those who helped bring Kokoity to power in his time, and also Anatoly Barankevich, living in exile from the republic. What's more, this part of the opposition led by Dzhussoyev will have to compete with the Communist Party and its leader Kochiyev for the protest vote. But the main weapon in the opposition's hand is criticism of the current government, and keeping the opposition's rise in check has forced Kokoity and his team to launch an urgent drive to fight corruption.

Using what people in South Ossetia consider influence in Moscow, he has managed to limit the activeness of the opposition's informal leader, businessman Dzhussoyev. Kokoity recently distanced himself publicly from one of his most 'loyal' allies, Zurab Kabisov, chairman of the State Committee for South Ossetian Reconstruction Projects, who was also blamed for the delays in rebuilding work. The decision to lay the blame on Kabisov probably arose from fears that the issue of financial manipulation schemes could be used against the candidate from Kokoity's team in the 2011 election. The blame for the problems in the reconstruction work is usually placed on Southern Office for Program and Project Implementation, subordinate to Russia's Regional Development Ministry, which has been named as Brovtsev's main patron and protector in Moscow. Kokoity's claims against the Southern Office have been backed up by the results of checks carried out by Russia's Prosecutor General's Office.

In sacrificing a member of his own entourage Kokoity has snatched the initiative from Brovtsev, neutralized him, and could now find a way to 'rise above the fray' and give himself the image of

unbiased arbiter and resolute anti-corruption campaigner. It will be much easier now for him to accuse members of Brovtsev's team of corruption and get criminal cases against them opened. The parliament is due to publish soon the final report of its commission into government activity, set up during the spring. There is no doubt that the commission's findings will not be good, and this will inevitably weaken Brovtsev's position and strengthen Kokoity.

Having neutralized Brovtsev, Kokoity will probably now want to clear the political field and ensure victory for his successor (Tskhovrebov or Khugayev). This looks a logical scenario, but it does not take into account the biggest factor in the republic's life – Russia's role. Will Russia agree to this 'successor operation'? What role does Russia see for the South Ossetian president after the election? These questions remain unanswered for now. But whatever the circumstances, none of the groups and forces seeking to take part in the presidential election will use anti-Russian rhetoric or change the policy of close alliance with Russia. This is not a subject of debate in the republic. By the same token, there are no 'pro-Georgian' forces in the republic today, no groups or politicians openly expressing sympathy for Georgia and the possibility of returning South Ossetia to the Georgian fold as a full-fledged autonomous entity within Georgia.

Moscow will certainly not simply let the situation in South Ossetia follow its own flow, although it is receiving somewhat conflicting signals from the republic (given the prime minister's independent game). The possibility that Moscow could backtrack and 'surrender' South Ossetia to Tbilisi in return for normalization of relations with Georgia ('exchanging' South Ossetia for Abkhazia) is not an option being considered at all, although foreign experts and politicians often seem to pick up and circulate such rumors.

Some people in the West, in Georgia, and even in some circles in Russia itself still have illusions that Moscow might backtrack on its recognition of South Ossetia and Georgia. The West continues for now to use various mechanisms to advise Russia to do just this. This position makes Moscow's task easier. This situation looks likely to continue for some time yet. As Russian government circles see it, if the West is not ready to take into account Russia's concerns, Moscow has no need to consider possible concessions and compromises, such as allowing an OSCE mission to work in South Ossetia, for example. In Russia's view, any concessions must be reciprocal, but this is not the case today. Cooperation with the OSCE, EU or other organizations on issues related to South Ossetia is not a goal in itself for Moscow and Tskhinvali, and would be possible only on condition of real reciprocal steps taken by these organizations.

The only obstacle to OSCE, EU or UN missions working in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is clearly these organizations' officials' persistence in calling the two new republics Georgian territory. If they were to adopt a more neutral wording that does not actually recognize independence but at least allows all sides to save face, they would have no problem in being allowed to have missions on the ground monitoring the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

With a year to go until the presidential election, the internal political situation in South Ossetia is becoming clearly more complicated, and this is linked to the absence of a generally recognized favourite in the upcoming campaign and the presence of a large number of influential players. Adding to the threat of increased internal political instability during the election campaign is the authorities' (both the government and the president's) lack of a clear development scenario for the republic.

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