

South Ossetia's unification referendum poses a dilemma for both Georgia and Russia

On 19 October, the President of South Ossetia announced plans to hold a referendum on the territory's unification with Russia. [Till Spanke](#) writes that while two previous referendums have been held following the territory's declaration of independence from Georgia in 1990, a further referendum is unlikely to be welcomed in either Tbilisi or Moscow. He argues that there are few immediate advantages for Russia of pursuing a unification in the current climate and it is likely South Ossetia will come under pressure to delay or cancel the referendum process.



South Ossetia, a breakaway region on the territory of Georgia in the South Caucasus, has announced its plan to hold a referendum on unification with the Russian Federation. This development may not come as a surprise for observers of the region, yet the announcement puts Georgia and Russia in a difficult situation as it comes at an inconvenient point in time for both countries.

The region's *de facto* president Leonid Tibilov informed the media on 19 October about his decision to initiate a referendum on joining the Russian Federation after a meeting with Vladislav Surkov, the Russian president's advisor for separatist matters, according to the South Ossetian [news agency Res](#). This would be the third referendum of its kind since 1992.

South Ossetia and Russia

South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia in 1990, which ultimately resulted in the South Ossetian War of 1991 and 1992 that was fought between Georgian and South Ossetian forces. Brief periods of conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia took place in 2004 and 2008 as well, leading to the Russia-Georgia war of 2008.

The latter event gave South Ossetia and Russia full control of the secessionist territory and eventually Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru recognised South Ossetia as an independent state. Since then, most academic scholars and analysts agree that South Ossetia [relies](#) to a large extent on financial, military and political support from Russia in order to function as a *de facto* state. Georgia and some other members of the international community, such as the [United States](#), even go as far as to say that the Russian military [occupies South Ossetia](#).



South Ossetian Internally Displaced Persons' camp in Skra. Credit: Marco Fleber / Flickr (CC BY 2.0)

Russia's extensive backing of South Ossetia is not the only reason why Tibilov's decision to hold a referendum on joining the Russian Federation does not necessarily come as a surprise. North Ossetia is already a Russian region and Ossetian nationalists strive for the reunification with their northern part. Moreover, Russia has provided many South Ossetians with [Russian passports](#) in recent years. Therefore, a close affiliation between South Ossetia and Russia is understandable.

South Ossetia's desire to become part of its patron state is not exclusively connected to the population's wish to be part of Ossetia and Russia, but also due to structural and economic necessity. Comparative [studies](#) including other unrecognised states in the region such as Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh have highlighted that South Ossetia is the least developed region in terms of civil society, the economy and state building efforts.

Thus, the long-term sustainability of South Ossetia's independence and its state integrity seems unlikely and unfeasible without Russia's financial backing. Tibilov [identified](#) the security and prosperity of South Ossetians as key motives for wishing to join Russia. Nevertheless it is important to point out that Tibilov's plan is not uncontested within South Ossetia. The first referendum held in South Ossetia in 1992 was in favour of joining Russia, whereas in the second referendum in 2006 South Ossetians voted in favour of staying independent.



Map of Georgia and its contested regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Credit: Ssolbergj / Wikimedia (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Impact of the referendum

The announcement of the referendum will not have gone unheard in Tbilisi and Moscow. Russia is struggling with the economic implications of the sanctions that western countries imposed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Therefore, it will need to apply a cost-benefit analysis concerning a potential unification with South Ossetia.

In essence, there are not many advantages of a unification for Russia, but a considerable amount of negative implications such as possible further economic sanctions. Leonid Kalashnikov, deputy chairman of the Duma's international affairs committee, told [RIA](#) that a referendum would not only be "bad timing" but would also have considerable negative effects on Russia's diplomatic and international relations.

At the same time, it will be Russia's aim to assure the security and financial stability of the breakaway region and maintain the *status quo*. Russia will most likely aim to delay the referendum process in order to find alternative ways to cater for South Ossetia and settle disputes with western partners. Therefore, it is not surprising that Dmitry Peskov,

Vladimir Putin's press secretary, interpreted Tbilov's words in a different way and does not foresee a referendum anytime soon.

In the case of Georgia, Tbilisi requires more time to deal with the possible referendum appropriately. Even though the Georgian government was quick to [announce](#) that the possible referendum was illegal, the latest developments will be of more concern to Georgia and particularly its current government, than it would like to admit.

The strategy of the current Georgian government toward its secessionist regions revolves around improving the economy, social services and fighting corruption in order to lure the unrecognised states back to Georgia. Even though this strategy can be considered more plausible in the long-term than former Georgian president Sakaashvili's use of military force, this strategy has, nonetheless, one fundamental flaw: it requires time. Time, that the Georgian government does not have if South Ossetia goes ahead with the referendum. In addition, the ruling party in Georgia, Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia, wants to be re-elected in the 2016 parliamentary elections. The government will try to avoid being portrayed as weak, indecisive and not being able to protect the sovereignty of its state.

It remains to be seen how Russia and Georgia will react. It is, however, doubtful that Russia is going to risk the likely negative implications of a unification with South Ossetia. Overall, it is to be expected that both Russia and Georgia will try to buy time by delaying or stopping the referendum from taking place.

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