

Georgian Tycoon Moves Into TV

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Controversial businessman rounds off his media empire with a new TV station.

Georgian business tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili, who likes to portray himself as a philanthropist but is often accused of "unfair competition" by his critics, has launched a new television company called Imedi, or Hope.

"Georgia today craves hope, above all," he said at the opening event. "I believe that these new studios, together with the rest of our media holding, will bring back hope to the Georgian people. That's why I'm spending so much money on it."

The opening of Imedi TV marked the final stage in the creation of Georgia's first media empire, E-Media, which consists of TV and radio companies, a daily newspaper, a magazine, and a showbusiness agency.

But the Georgian media and public seem less interested in the new media empire than in its proprietor and his colourful past.

Patarkatsishvili returned to Georgia from Russia in 2000, and has since settled there.

He is one of the few people who can truly call themselves close friends of the Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky. In October 2002 Russian police brought charges against both men as part of an investigation into fraud at the latter's LogoVAZ automotive firm, where Patarkatsishvili was his aide in the mid-Nineties.

In December last year, the country's prosecution service refused to hand him over to Russia. A spokeswoman for the service said, "Georgia doesn't extradite its citizens".

He enjoys the patronage of Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze, who intervened on his behalf when the Russian authorities accused him of fraud. "Badri Patarkatsishvili is a citizen of Georgia who can do a lot of useful things for his own country and Russia," Shevardnadze said.

The special relationship between Shevardnadze and Patarkatsishvili is said to have begun in the late Nineties.

Koka Kandiashvili, anchor of a popular evening TV programme, used to work for Patarkatsishvili and believes that Shevardnadze's patronage will be enough to protect him from Russian attempts at extradition. "I don't think the Russians are hunting for Patarkatsishvili," he told IWPR. "[Russian president Vladimir] Putin and Shevardnadze would negotiate on this if they really wanted to," he said.

Patarkatsishvili has invested aggressively in numerous industries. But even though Georgia's cash-strapped economy needs the investment, every purchase he makes meets with sharp criticism and accusations of unfair play from Georgian media and analysts.

"No western businessmen or international financial institution will be keen to get into a country where

there is no independent decision-making because everything - politics and business - suits the needs of just one man," says Malkhaz Ramishvili, publisher of the Rezonansi newspaper.

"If Patarkatsishvili triumphs over every strategically important enterprise in Georgia, this will not be viewed positively by Georgia's potential partners".

The businessman's investments are said to include a stake in a cloth factory, the purchase of a hotel on the Black Sea coast with a view to turning it into a holiday complex, and reconstruction of buildings in Mtskheta - the ancient capital of Georgia, now a small town some 30 km from Tbilisi.

Patarkatsishvili has also put money into ventures with more popular appeal. He bought the Tbilisi Dynamo football club just under two years ago, and was simultaneously elected president of the Georgian Olympic Committee Fund and vice-president of the Olympic Committee itself.

He has even promised to rescue the ailing national circus. "In Georgia's current economic environment it would be madness to expect a circus to make a serious profit. The only return on this project will be moral satisfaction," - he told IWPR.

Patarkatsishvili has made a point of making big charitable donations. On a freezing January 6 last year - Christmas day in the Georgian Orthodox calendar - he gave the Tbilisi city authorities enough money to pay off their debts to the Russian gas supplier and prevent gas and heating in the city from being cut off. Four months later he donated more cash to help victims of an earthquake which hit the city.

But others are more sceptical about his intentions. Publisher and journalist Malkaz Ramishvili says, "All this is a means to get Georgia into his pocket, to let him control all areas of life and politics in this country."

Ramishvili sees two possible ways of looking at Patarkatsishvili's aims. One is that "Patarkatsishvili is playing a multi-combination chess game with the Russian authorities. They've told him: we will ask the Georgians to give you to us, but we won't do it on a serious legal basis. In the mean time, you will ensure that the strategic assets in Georgia become yours, and then in a year or so, during the presidential elections, you will use this leverage in ways to make sure the Georgian president is someone pro-Russian."

An alternative view offered by Ramishvili is that Patarkatsishvili just likes being a big fish in a small pond. "Who knows, maybe one day it will present good opportunities for Patarkatsishvili."

The man himself says he's just acting in Georgia interests. "I am not an egocentric person. I say live and let live. I have a vested interest in seeing my country emerge as a strong economic and political power," Patarkatsishvili told IWPR. "Business is more exciting when you compete on an equal footing."

Patarkatsishvili's move into media may indicate a change of tack, towards a more public profile.

Another possible indication is that two weeks ago Patarkatsishvili made his ever first public political statement. At a meeting of Georgian businessmen he told the press he was going to support two opposition parties: former speaker Zurab Zhvania's United Democrats and the New Rights party led by Levan Gachechiladze and David Gamkrelidze.

But Patarkatsishvili denies he has political ambitions. "If I had ever wanted to go into politics, I would have done so years ago. I made my choice when I decided to be a businessman. It is not my intention to support

any political figure financially, but I am open to partnership with anyone who shares my conviction that the constitution must be upheld by all means," he told IWPR.

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