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GEORGIA TO LAUNCH ‘CAUCASUS ONE.’

GEORGIA TO LAUNCH ‘CAUCASUS ONE.’ – New Television Channel Could Further Complicate Relations Between Moscow and Tbilisi. (By Olga Allenova. *Kommersant*, Nov. 9, 2009, p. 8. Condensed text:) There was confirmation late last week that Georgia is launching a new Russian-language television channel designed to cover news from the North and South Caucasus. . . .

Kommersant reported in late October that a new television channel was being launched in Georgia under the working name *Caucasus One*, but at that time a *Kommersant* source in the management of Georgian Public Television (OTV) said it was merely a matter of expanding OTV’s broadcast area to include the North Caucasus region through the use of satellites. OTV general director Gia Chanturia confirmed for the Georgian newspaper *Rezonansi* last week that *Caucasus One* will start up at the beginning of the new year, and that its viewers may include not only residents of Georgia, but also people in Russia. This news was instantly picked up by Russian media outlets, which reported that the faces of the new TV channel would be Alla Dudayeva, widow of the first president of Ichkeria [separatist Chechnya], and Oleg Panfilov, head of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, who is known for his critical attitude toward the Russian authorities.

“I don’t understand why the launching of a new television channel in Georgia is such sensational news to Russians,” Ia Barateli, editor in chief of *Alania TV*, remarked to *Kommersant*. “The idea for the new channel has been in the air ever since a vigorous anti-Georgian campaign was launched in the Russian media. The Caucasus today is not a single information space, unfortunately. Even our next-door neighbors, Armenia and Azerbaijan, get the news from Georgia via Russian television. This became a very critical issue during the war. And we realized that if we want our neighbors to know our position, we need to start up our own Russian-language television channel.”

Mr. Panfilov and Ms. Dudayeva will in fact be invited to work for the new TV channel, Ms. Barateli said, and so will several Russian-speaking journalists from *Alania TV*, although *Alania* and *Caucasus One* are based on very different concepts: *Alania* covers regional issues within Georgia, while the new TV channel will devote more attention to news from the North Caucasus. “Today we don’t know what is actually happening in Makhachkala, Nazran or Grozny, because Russian television definitely doesn’t cover everything,” Ms. Barateli said. “And after last year’s war, it is very important for us to have that information, because there is still a

risk that Russia could attack Georgia. The neighboring regions are a war zone – bombs go off all the time in Ingushetia, Dagestan and Chechnya. People should know why this is happening. Our project is not directed against Russia, but it is, of course, being done in the interests of Georgia.”

Some Russian and Georgian media outlets have reported that the new television channel is being bankrolled by political émigré Boris Berezovsky, but he himself has denied that allegation. It is also denied by official sources in Tbilisi. . . . But Georgian opposition activists don't rule out the possibility that Berezovsky's name is purposely being linked with the new TV channel in order to irritate Moscow, where the new channel is perceived as an “enemy voice” on Russian territory.

Moscow already suspects Tbilisi of being involved in subversive activity in the North Caucasus. Russian FSB [Federal Security Service] Director Aleksandr Bortnikov said in October that Georgian special services maintain links with Al Qaeda through Doku Umarov, the notorious ideologist of the Chechen resistance, who is wanted by federal authorities in Russia. . . . Official Tbilisi has denied that Umarov is in Georgia. Nevertheless, deputies to the Georgian parliament declared that “external threats to Georgia are growing” and initiated a move to send a special commission to the Pankisi Gorge. It did not find any indications that Doku Umarov or other Al Qaeda emissaries had been there, however.

Against this backdrop, the idea of launching a new television channel could further complicate relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, says Erosi Kitsmarishvili [an opposition figure and former Georgian ambassador to Russia]. “This TV channel is a mistake on Saakashvili's part,” Mr. Kitsmarishvili told Kommersant. “Don't forget that back when Shevardnadze was in power, Tbilisi and Moscow got into a conflict over these same places, the North Caucasus and Pankisi. Now Saakashvili is making the same mistake: He is pursuing a policy of provoking Moscow, which was one of the factors in the August war.”

Meanwhile, Alla Dudayeva, the widow of the first president of Ichkeria, told Kommersant that the objectives of the new television channel are “completely peaceful,” and that she has agreed to participate in the project because the channel provides a format in which she can “do the most good.” For that purpose, Ms. Dudayeva has even asked Mikhail Saakashvili for Georgian citizenship. “Georgians know very little about what happened in Chechnya in the early 1990s; they don't have our experience,” Alla Dudayeva said. “But the situation is being repeated; the Russian authorities are using all sorts of methods to deprive the people of their freedom and their democratic choice. Meanwhile, human lives aren't even taken into consideration. I don't want politics, I want to defend people's right to live their lives. If we initiate this discussion on television, I think we can unite our peoples, who have been divided by war and politics.”