

# ➤ Georgia

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**The Eurasian Union, Vladimir Putin's lifetime geopolitical project, has long been considered highly undesirable in Georgia. For the previous United National Movement (UNM) government that ruled the country between 2004 and 2012, Russia represented Georgia's number one foe, a military aggressor that occupied its northern provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This strategic conflict was reinforced by a clash of values: the 'Rose Revolution', the pro-Western movement that brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power was Putin's constant target, illustrated by the 2008 invasion and numerous destabilisation attempts.<sup>1</sup> The very few open supporters of Russia in Georgian politics were considered marginal, even extreme voices, and accused of being Kremlin stooges and the 'fifth column'. Their access to the media was limited and their members could only express their views in three or four tabloids ignored by the elite. This narrative has changed significantly since the parliamentary elections of October 2012 and the victory of the opposition 'Georgian Dream' (GD) alliance, led by the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in Russia in the 1990's.**

In September 2013, the new Prime Minister told a journalist enquiring about his vision for the Eurasian Union that Georgia should consider the option.<sup>2</sup> A few weeks earlier, after meeting with his Armenian colleagues, Ivanishvili had announced that Armenia's foreign policy was a good example for Georgia of how a small country of the region could balance its interests between the West and Russia.<sup>3</sup> This rhetorical shift has prompted a good deal of commentary in Georgia and beyond. The UNM and its supporters saw in the Prime Minister's comments confirmation of Mr Ivanishvili's pro-Kremlin inclinations. Inside the governing coalition there was confusion: the pro-Russians couldn't believe the change could be so dramatic and swift, whereas the pro-Western Republicans hoped that it reflected the billionaire's lack of experience in international politics.<sup>4</sup> For their part, foreign observers debated whether these declarations were a genuine harbinger of a change of direction in Georgian foreign policy.

No other official statements supporting the idea of joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) have followed, but the government has nonetheless cultivated a certain ambivalence with regard to the EU and Russia's respective regional integration plans.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the new government has remained committed to its predecessors' endeavours to conclude an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU and to seek NATO membership. The signing of the AA,

1 The former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili had relentlessly denounced Russia's regional policies and repeatedly emphasised that Putin described the end of the Soviet Union as the worst geopolitical catastrophe at the very first meeting of the two presidents in yearly spring 2004.

2 Ivanishvili declared on Georgian National TV: 'I'm keeping a close eye on it [the Eurasian Union] and we are studying it. At this stage we have no position yet. If in perspective we see that it is in our country's strategic interest, then, why not?' 'Georgia PM says 'why not?' on Eurasian Union', *euobserver*, 04/09/2013. <http://euobserver.com/foreign/121315>

3 Armenia has abandoned the project of signing an Association Agreement with the EU and announced that it would instead join the Eurasian Union.

4 The Republican Party with its 9 MPs (including the head of the Parliament) and one minister in the government is considered as the most pro-Western political group inside the GD coalition. Their alliance with GD is often used by the latter as an argument against the accusations of their sympathies towards Moscow. Besides the Republicans, Ivanishvili's coalition includes the Free Democrats (right), the National Forum (far right), the Social-Democrats (post-Soviet left), Industrialists (former Soviet 'entrepreneurs') and the Georgian Dream party itself (populist, with high percentage of sport and cinema celebrities).

5 A good illustration of this ambivalence was the publication of an opinion paper published in Wall Street Journal the 29 May 2014 by Georgia's EU and Euro-atlantic integration minister Alex Petriashvili, who belongs to a pro-Western wing of the government. His article made a clear case for Georgia's integration in NATO but was followed by the following note: 'The opinions expressed are solely those of the author and not necessarily those of the Georgian government', see <http://online.wsj.com/articles/to-halt-putin-bring-georgia-closer-to-nato-1401390640>

which includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), will be announced on 27 June 2014. Yet on the other hand, Tbilisi has continued to issue statements that these foreign policy goals are to be attained with the consent of Russia. 'Convincing Russia' that Georgia's membership in NATO is not in conflict with Moscow's interests has been one of the government's most consistent diplomatic refrains.<sup>6</sup>

The new Georgian leadership's insistence on the compatibility of the Russian and EU/NATO agendas has been challenged by the crisis in Ukraine and the growing tensions between Russia and the West. In spite of what some have described as the 'tectonic changes'<sup>7</sup> provoked by the crisis, the Ivanishvili administration remained wedded to a twin policy of rapprochement with the EU and NATO conducted in parallel with the normalisation of relations with Moscow.<sup>8</sup> The Georgian leadership has adopted a low profile on Ukraine, limiting itself to expressing the hope that both sides would show restraint and regretting the violence that took the lives of 100 people during the clashes in the Maidan.<sup>9</sup> Officially this cautious attitude is justified by the desire not to upset Russia, an attitude severely criticised by the opposition UNM, who now claim that the future of Georgia is also to be decided in Kiev.

This contribution assesses whether the rhetoric policies of the Ivanishvili government<sup>10</sup> constitute a substantive change in Georgia's policies towards Russia. The current government's belief, that if Georgia ceases to be problematic for Russia-West relations it would bring more Western (German and French) sympathy and support for the country, remains to be confirmed. On the one hand, the governing party has been using the issue of relations with Russia to differentiate itself from – and attempt to weaken – the UNM. On the other hand, to strengthen popular support for its policies, the new government increasingly needs to rely on those segments of Georgian society that are more inclined to support Russia. However, the correlated change in diplomatic attitude towards Moscow is unlikely to either make Russia shift its position on the occupied provinces (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), or to prevent Georgia from signing an Association Agreement with the EU.

## REDUCED CONFRONTATION

The recent declarations of the government ought first and foremost to be placed in the context of Georgian domestic politics. One of the key political motivations of the ruling coalition led by the GD has been to render the UNM as weak as possible and prevent it from returning to power. The new authorities have attacked the former government on its record on Russia in particular, making it an increasingly polarizing issue for the political class. During the election campaign and after its victory, the GD has accused the UNM of having destroyed Georgia's links with Russia and having provoked the Russian military intervention in 2008. The GD government then went even further, accusing the previous leadership of assisting and training the 'Chechen terrorists' fighting a guerrilla war against Russia in the North Caucasus.<sup>11</sup> The new authorities also reversed a number

6 President Margvelashvili told the Interfax news agency as late as the 15 February 2014 that 'Georgia must try and convince Moscow that its membership in NATO wouldn't menace Russia' (see [www.interfax.ru/r/titles/94434521/georgias-nato-membership-wouldnt-menace-russia-president](http://www.interfax.ru/r/titles/94434521/georgias-nato-membership-wouldnt-menace-russia-president)).

7 See for instance: Adam Michnik, 'Putin's impunity', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19/03/2014. [http://www.ms.gov.pl/en/news/they\\_wrote\\_about\\_us/0\\_putin\\_s\\_impunity\\_an\\_article\\_by\\_adam\\_michnik\\_editor\\_in\\_chief\\_of\\_polish\\_daily\\_gazeta\\_wyborcza\\_](http://www.ms.gov.pl/en/news/they_wrote_about_us/0_putin_s_impunity_an_article_by_adam_michnik_editor_in_chief_of_polish_daily_gazeta_wyborcza_)

8 See President Margvelashvili's interview with Radio Free Europe on 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2014. <http://www.rferl.org/media/video/georgia-president-margvelashvili/25362972.html>

9 Some individuals from the GD made statements in favour of the new Ukrainian government (including the head of the Georgian Parliament, the Republican Davit Usupashvili), whereas others distinguished themselves by more pro-Russian attitudes (e.g. GD MPs Tkemaladze, Volski). The vice-prime minister and former football player Kaladze stated that the Maidan events were limited to Hrushevskii street in Kiev only. By contrast, the UNM's support for Ukraine is unanimous and many of its members showed up at Maidan standing side by side with the anti-Yanukovich demonstrators. This probably increased the Georgian government's mistrust in new Ukrainian leadership, augmented by the fact that the new Ukrainian authorities appointed several Georgian advisors from UNM government. The minister of interior, Mr Tjikaidze has even declared that the most important threat to the stability in Georgia was the remake of the Ukrainian scenario.

10 The current head of government is the 31 year old Irakli Gharibashvili, but Mr.Ivanishvili, who officially doesn't have any public position, remains the effective decision maker.

11 In spring 2013, the newly appointed ombudsman Ucha Nanuashvili corroborated Russian claims about the former government helping Chechen fighters with weapons and logistics. <http://www.rferl.org/content/georgia-chechen-militants-allegations-saakashvili-denial/24970927.html>

of the previous government's policies, notably choosing to label as 'political prisoners' and grant amnesty all the individuals imprisoned or charged under the UNM for 'espionage in favour of the Russian Federation', including the persons arrested in 2011 for the attempt to blow-up the fences of the US embassy in Tbilisi.

Ivanishvili also made it his policy to adopt a less confrontational foreign policy stance towards Russia. The new government has fired 18 ambassadors for their 'political loyalty' with the previous government, including experienced diplomats serving in key capitals (including Washington, Brussels, London, Paris, Berlin, Rome and Beijing) and in important international organizations (UN, OSCE, Council of Europe). Even more substantively, it has downplayed its insistence on the fulfilment of the 2008 'six-points' cease-fire agreement as well as the active 'non-recognition policy of Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).<sup>12</sup> However, this new approach did not lead Russia to relax its position on the occupied provinces, and the Georgian MFA has recently become more active in seeking Western support to arrest the process of 'borderisation' – the unilateral and often arbitrary building up of fences and barbed wires around the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – by Russian forces. Thus in spite of the less confrontational attitude adopted by the new government, eighteen months on the Kremlin's attitude towards Tbilisi remained almost unchanged. Moscow's anti-Georgian rhetoric has softened as the strong ideological opposition frequently raised by the previous Georgian government has disappeared, and Russia has lifted its previous embargoes on Georgian wines and mineral water.<sup>13</sup> But Russia's military occupation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has continued unabated, and the Kremlin continues to insist Georgia accept 'the new reality' on the ground, meaning the 'independence' of two former provinces. Moscow hasn't stopped 'borderisation' and didn't reciprocate Georgia's decision to introduce a visa-free regime for Russian citizens.<sup>14</sup> More recently, Russian MFA spokesman Alexander Lukashevich made a statement on Georgia's AA agreement with the EU, which shows little change in Moscow's attitude towards Tbilisi's foreign policy orientation. On May 22<sup>nd</sup> he declared that 'it is very important to understand consequences to which the upcoming signing of the Association Agreement between Georgia and the EU on 27 June may lead... It concerns both our bilateral [Russian-Georgian] relations and financial-economic consequences, which we will have to elaborate by taking into account Georgia's joining the EU [Association] Agreement.'<sup>15</sup>

Georgia is an important country for Russia's geopolitical strategy. It is the key to the Southern Caucasus, and having the country under its control would also allow Moscow to have a firmer grasp on the North Caucasus. It would establish a territorial continuity with Russia's sole ally in the South Caucasus, Armenia. Bringing Tbilisi under Moscow's influence would also make possible a direct territorial link between Russia and Iran, an important ally for the Kremlin in the Middle East.<sup>16</sup> And last and not least, control over Georgia would transform oil and gas rich Azerbaijan into a 'geopolitical island' with no land connection with Turkey and Europe. Thus isolated, Azerbaijan might automatically fall under Russian influence, endangering Europe's policy of diversification of energy supplies and putting under Moscow's control an important alternative energy supply route from the Caspian Sea to European markets.

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12 After the conflict of August 2008, the Georgian MFA had been actively engaged in a policy of countering Russia's check book diplomacy, by which Moscow made numerous attempts to 'buy' the recognition of South Ossetian and Abkhaz 'independence' by the states from Oceania, Latin America/Caribbean and Africa. Mr Ivanishvili declared in one of his multi hour TV appearances, that 'before the whole ministry (the MFA) was organised around the non-recognition issue. Maia (Panjikidze – the new minister) has entirely changed this, she reorganised everything' (see Ivanishvili's interview in April 2013 aired simultaneously on four main TV channels).

13 The import of the Georgian wine, mineral waters and other foodstuffs was banned in Russia in 2006. It was a clear retaliation measure against the arrest and the subsequent deportation to Russia of four Russian embassy employees, accused of sabotage and spying.

14 This initiative of the previous government became effective in March 2012.

15 See the transcript of Lukashevich statements: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27256>

16 The Iranians have announced the project of building a railway axis to the Armenian border. If completed, the only missing link between Iran and Russia will be Georgia. Georgia has however been favouring an East-West railway project: Baku-Tbilisi-Kars, connecting Azerbaijan (and possibly in the future the Central Asia) with Turkey and Europe.

In spite of Georgia's significance, over the last months Moscow has put less pressure on Tbilisi than it has applied either to other countries of the region or to Georgia in the past. First, Russia is absorbed with the conflict in Ukraine, which remains the most important country in the region for Moscow. Second, it might well be that the Kremlin considers that the low profile adopted by the current Georgian government with regard to EU-Russia regional competition is the best it can hope for in light of the anti-Russian sentiment of Georgian public opinion.

## PUBLIC OPINION

Indeed, a strong majority of Georgian society favours integration with the West and remains deeply hostile to Russia. According to the latest opinion polls conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in April 2014, 65 and 60 percent of Georgians would like to see their country as member of the EU and NATO respectively, numbers that are only slightly diminished compared to previous years. Only 16 percent would consider Eurasian Union membership, with more than 50 percent believing Russia is a serious threat to Georgia, a further 32 percent describing it as a threat and just 13 percent assured that Moscow doesn't represent any threat for the country.<sup>17</sup> In light of these figures, abandoning the AA process with the EU or Georgia's bid for NATO membership would be detrimental for the GD, reinforcing the UNM, with its longstanding pro-Western orientation and hostility towards Russia. Thus, while softening its diplomatic attitude towards Moscow and avoiding taking conspicuous positions on the Eastern Partnership-Eurasian Union rivalry, the current government has nonetheless remained committed to the Association process with the EU. Indeed, Tbilisi's position vis-à-vis the EU has been strengthened by the Ukraine crisis: Brussels has become more active in the region as a consequence of events in Kiev and has considerably accelerated the process towards signing Georgia's AA and DCFTA. By contrast, Russia's ability to promote EEU membership for Georgia is limited. Georgian public opinion remains implacable, and the recent history of conflict between the two countries demonstrates that Moscow has been forced to rely on punitive measures rather than positive incentives to secure Georgian acquiescence to its interests.

Georgia's membership of the EEU is thus contingent on Russia's ability to shape societal attitudes. Yet improving Russia's standing among the Georgian public might not be as unthinkable as it was a couple of years ago. A fairly significant proportion of Georgians remains nostalgic for the Soviet Union. This group includes those left behind by the liberal economic reforms undertaken by the previous government, as well as those who enjoyed relatively decent living standards under the USSR thanks to their involvement in various shadow economic activities (Georgia was among the most corrupt soviet republics).<sup>18</sup> In addition, and as in other post-Soviet countries, the conservative religious (orthodox Christian) electorate tends to have a positive image of the soviet past and doesn't necessarily see Vladimir Putin as a threat.<sup>19</sup> This conservative vote was key to the GD's electoral victory in 2012 and remains an important support base for its policies. The conservative electorate is particularly opposed to the UNM, which it regards as too liberal and 'Westernised', and accuses of betraying traditions and challenging the church.

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<sup>17</sup> See <http://agenda.ge/news/13616/eng>

<sup>18</sup> Georgia was heavily corrupt in the 1960's, even by Soviet standards, and the level of corruption reached its climax after independence under the second term of Edward Shevardnadze. According to the Transparency International Corruption perception Index, Georgia was ranked 127<sup>th</sup> among the 133 countries surveyed in 2003. The situation dramatically improved under Saakashvili: Georgia is now ranked 55<sup>th</sup> in 2013. See: <http://cpi.transparency.org/>

<sup>19</sup> As the main ideological focus of the Kremlin is now the battle for conservative values, such as the defence of traditional family against the moral decay of the West, officially accused of promoting 'sexual perversion', many conservative orthodox Christians consider Moscow as the ultimate barrier against overall spread of the LGBT behaviour. The nostalgia for the USSR has curiously merged with the most conservative religious attitudes and beliefs.

After the victory of the GD, the Church and the anti-Western social groups became more active in the country and have required more privileges from the government. The marginal, openly pro-Kremlin NGOs have flourished, such as 'Eurasian Institute', or 'Irakli the II association'<sup>20</sup> and many exiled pro-kremlin activists made their triumphal return to the country. Entirely invisible during a decade, mainly because of a tacit consensus among the main media resources strongly supported by the ruling party of that time, the UNM to block their access, since the change of the government, these politicians became frequent guests of political talk-shows and made their arguments in favor of Putin's Russia and against EU and NATO heard by everyone. Such a groups have managed to organise several pro-Russian rallies in Tbilisi (one in support of Russia's annexation of Crimea) and even if these events were attended by a small number of participants, the very fact of their occurrence was unthinkable a year and half ago.<sup>21</sup> These groups managed to secure their access to the public sphere by putting their ideas at the service of the current government's political battle against the opposition.

The church, already extremely rich and influent under Saakashvili, has gained even greater leverage on policy on education, justice, rights of minorities and even foreign policy. The church's presence has become more and more visible at schools, universities and courts, as well as a range of governmental structures and agencies. Orthodox dignitaries are frequent guests in the Parliament of Georgia, where they seek to influence the legislative process. On 17 May 2013 a small rally organised by LGBT NGOs dedicated to the international day against homophobia was attacked by a counter demonstration organised by the Orthodox Church of Georgia, with authorities unable to prevent the violence in the central avenue of the capital.<sup>22</sup> The state and the judiciary also failed to condemn or prosecute the perpetrators of the violence, despite significant video and audio evidence of concrete church representatives involved in the beating.<sup>23</sup> A month later, following a request from the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Police dismantled a minaret in a predominantly Muslim village in the south of the country, on the dubious pretext of some fiscal problem. During parliamentary debates on the 'anti-discrimination law', a requirement from the EU in the process of negotiations on visa liberalisation, the church and pro-Russian organisations acted as cheerleaders for the Kremlin's discourse on the 'ocean of perversion' represented by the West, disseminating disinformation about 'the teaching of homosexuality at schools' and 'the legality of paedophilia and incest' in Europe.

The coalition has its hands tied with these groups, because of their proportional weight amongst the GD electorate. While Ivanishvili did criticise the church after the violence surrounding the 17 May rally, many GD members, including MPs and ministers regard the head of the Georgian Orthodox church as the supreme authority of the country. Relatively good results for openly pro-Russian political parties in the 15 June local elections is another matter of concern. Nino Burjanadze's 'United Georgia' and David Tarkhan-Mouravi and Irma Inashvili's 'Alliance of Patriots'<sup>24</sup> respectively gained ten and six percent of the vote. Some observers believe that the emergence of these forces is in the political interests of the GD, which would benefit from the emergence of a third political force, rather than having the UNM as its sole opponent.<sup>25</sup>

20 See the website of one of these associations, the Eurasian Institute: <http://www.geoeurasia.org>

21 <http://www.trust.org/item/20140327112528-4j7i1/?source=search>

22 [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/18/world/europe/gay-rights-rally-is-attacked-in-georgia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/18/world/europe/gay-rights-rally-is-attacked-in-georgia.html?_r=0)

23 The archbishop Lakob, a close associate of the Patriarch, emerged as the leader of the counter rally and later in the afternoon has celebrated a 'victory mass' in the Trinity cathedral. Georgian TV channels diffused video footages showing orthodox priests attacking the LGBT rally and their supporters.

24 Created in 2013, 'the Alliance of Patriots' is the most pro-Russian and the most radical party, focusing on anti-Western, anti-Turkish and anti LGBT positions. Rather than targeting the ruling coalition as a whole, their criticisms are mainly focused on the UNM and the liberal wing of the parliamentary majority (namely Republicans).

25 As the analytical newsletter civil.ge recently pointed out: 'When in April, 2013 PM Bidzina Ivanishvili was asked if he saw possibility of emergence of a third political force in the country, other than GD and UNM, he responded that he had such a desire and called on Nino Burjanadze's party, former foreign minister Salome Zourabichvili's party, as well as the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia to become more active on the political scene.' <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27395>. Similarly, commenting the results of the last local elections, PM Gharibashvili hailed the 'emergence of new political forces on the political scene' (TV statement of the PM 16 June 2014).

For its part, Moscow has been attempting to reach out to these segments of Georgian society, promoting positive images of the USSR and presenting Russia as the guardian of Christian morality in the face of a decadent Europe. These policies could be accompanied by a loose and vague promise of the 'possible reunification of Georgia' with its provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in some form of confederation. Of course, such a promise (so far not officially made) hardly sounds credible given the pattern of Russia's policies in its 'near abroad'. But when skilfully articulated via media and some civil society organisations, it can at worst increase popular support for Russia and divide the ruling coalition between the pro-Russian and the minority pro-Western segments.<sup>26</sup> At best, the pro-Western parties will lose their battle and leave the government. Abkhazia and South Ossetia constitute another lever for Moscow. *De facto* occupied by Russian forces, these regions, unlike Crimea, are not annexed officially by Russia. Moscow might consider offering to drop any annexation plan in exchange for Georgia's renouncement of integration with the EU/NATO.

Recent developments in Abkhazia, where the *de facto* leader Aleksandr Ankvab was ousted in a bloodless coup by a more radical pro-Russian forces confronting him on the issue of 60,000 ethnic Georgians still living in Abkhazia, shows that the situation in the region is highly volatile. Ankvab had been an uneasy proxy for the Kremlin. On several occasions he tried to avoid following Russian orders, for instance on land and real estate issues or on the building of a strategic road between Sukhumi and Cherkesk, which is in the Russian Caucasus. Most importantly, he was in favour of granting Abkhaz passports to the Georgians living in (and constituting the majority of) the southern district of Gali – a plan that was precipitated his downfall. Given this context, Moscow supports the expulsion policy of Ankvab's ousters, in an attempt to force Georgia to abandon its pro-Western foreign policy.

## CONCLUSION

The current government has not delivered a major shift in Georgia's foreign policy towards Russia, though it has amended Tbilisi's diplomatic posture in its dealings with Moscow. This has been prompted first by considerations linked to domestic politics: the need of the ruling coalition to distinguish itself from the previous government and to appeal to the conservative, anti-Western segment of its electorate. The GD government also believed that the change of rhetoric towards Moscow would dramatically improve relations with Russia. Yet the Kremlin's policies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Moscow's official statements about the Georgia-EU Association Agreement demonstrate that Moscow doesn't intend to correct its positions to any significant degree. At the same time, Ivanishvili and Gharibashvili's administration has remained committed to signing an AA with the EU and to pushing for NATO membership for Georgia. The majority of the Georgian population supports such integration with the West rather than with Russia, and this is even true for about half of GD voters.

The ruling coalition, seemingly obsessed by its political rivalry with the UNM, has directed its policy and strategy choices towards that fight, which included courting conservative forces within the country and the Orthodox Church in particular. Conscious that only a clear change in societal attitudes could lead Georgia to amend its geopolitical course, Moscow's tactical focus has been to reach out to these conservative groups. Russia could also attempt to lever its position in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to influence Tbilisi's decision making. In response, the EU should deploy its soft power and engage more profoundly with Georgian society, including with the progressive part of the Georgian Orthodox Church. ■

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<sup>26</sup> The political parties such as Nino Burjanadze's Democratic Party – United Georgia, the newly created 'Patriotic Alliance' and some of the components of the Georgian Dream coalition (industrialists, some individual members of the GD party), openly support the Russian position. Individual politicians rehabilitated by the current government, several journalists, experts and think-tankers previously banned from the mainstream media because of their open support for Russia, are back on air, along with some newly created TV channels, including Obiektiv TV, TV3, Imedi TV (the latter was given back to the family of the deceased oligarch Patarkacishvili who was prior to 2008 the main pro-Russian politician of Georgia).