

Georgia Launches TV Channel for the Caucasus — In Russian

January 25, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

TBILISI — Georgia launched a Russian-language television channel on Tuesday focusing on news coverage of events in the Caucasus region, including Russia's restive south.

The first program on the state-sponsored channel, First Caucasus News, was a marathon question-and-answer session between President Mikheil Saakashvili and the Georgian public. But the channel's director said it would not serve as a vehicle for state-controlled information.

"There is no way that we are going to let this channel be a propaganda channel," said Robert Parsons, the channel's director and a former BBC correspondent.

He conceded that Moscow was unlikely to look kindly on a Georgian-run channel broadcasting to its southern republics, including Chechnya.

"In Russia, there is no doubt that there will be a certain amount of hostility toward us," Parsons said. "Our target is essentially to fill the information vacuum. ... And of course, if you

try to fill the information vacuum in countries where the media is controlled by the state, the state is not going to like it."

Relations between Moscow and Tbilisi have remained frosty since Russia crushed a Georgian assault on Georgia's breakaway pro-Moscow region of South Ossetia in August 2008.

Analysts said the new TV channel would annoy Moscow.

"This channel will irritate officials in Moscow, of course, as it will violate a monopoly on media coverage of events especially in the turbulent North Caucasus region," independent analyst Alexander Rondeli said.

The new channel was briefly on air a year ago before Paris-based satellite operator Eutelsat cut transmission, saying a long-term contract had not been signed.

Georgia accused Russia of masterminding the move, but Moscow denied the charge and Eutelsat denied being pressured by Russia.

The broadcaster sued Eutelsat in the French courts but lost the case and switched to another satellite — Hot Bird E13.

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