

---

# Patarkatsishvili's Program : Buying the Election to Buy Georgia

By Vladimir Socor  
Eurasia Daily Monitor - 18/12/2007

---

Today (December 18) the tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili publicized his socioeconomic program as a presidential candidate via his fully owned media holding, Imedi. Addressing Georgia's voters from his temporary London domicile in the run-up to the January 5 presidential election, Patarkatsishvili pledged to:

a.. Cover the expenses of every household on gas and electricity (up to 100 kilowatt and 100 cubic meters) per month for 18 months, and all expenses on water consumption, "until problems in this sphere are solved and real tariffs are set" (he had earlier promised to cut tariffs down to "real" costs);

a.. Buy the full crop of grapes and citrus fruit next year and provide insurance for agricultural production (this gambit exploits farmers' frustration with Russia's political embargo on Georgian fruit and wine);

a.. Grant 3,000 Lari (approximately \$2,000) to families for their first child, 4,000 Lari for the second child, and 5,000 Lari for each child thereafter; and

a.. Pay unemployment benefits at an annual rate of 600 Lari per year to each unemployed person for the duration of 18 months.

Patarkatsishvili promises full financing of all those programs from his own wealth (Imedi, December 18).

This is not Patarkatsishvili's first offer to buy Georgia's voters wholesale in this election, but it is his most specific offer to date. On December 11 Patarkatsishvili's campaign staff in Tbilisi had announced that he plans to spend \$1 billion of his own funds for social programs, such as subsidizing electricity and gas tariffs for consumers, if elected president. Central Electoral Commission chairman Levan Tarkhnishvili termed those promises "an attempt at indirect bribery of voters" (Civil Georgia, December 11). The attempt in its now-expanded form can hardly be more direct.

Patarkatsishvili had previously vowed, "All my financial resources to the last penny shall be applied to freeing Georgia from this fascist regime," whom he also termed "berserk" in the same statement (Imedi TV, November 7). He seems indeed to have funded a country-wide electoral operation, as indicated by the signature-collection campaign to register Patarkatsishvili's presidential candidacy. The effort netted 202,000 signatures, the largest number collected by any presidential aspirant (Prime-News, Civil Georgia, December 6). In view of Patarkatsishvili's low popularity rating (consistently in the single digits over time, prior to this campaign), his signature-collection effort must have been well-financed country-wide to achieve that result.

Populist socioeconomic promises are associated in Georgia with the left-wing Labor Party of Shalva Natelashvili. That party's electoral stronghold is traditionally in the city of Tbilisi. There, Labor voters would be highly unlikely to vote for Patarkatsishvili the tycoon, but might switch to Patarkatsishvili the social demagogue, whose wealth enables him at the declaratory level to outbid even Natelashvili's populist promises.

Despite all his wealth and media assets, Patarkatsishvili seems highly unlikely to win a majority of votes in the presidential election even if he returns to Georgia (which he can do, thanks to legal immunity as a candidate). His apparent operational goal is to buy the election, in the sense of financing a regime-change effort and controlling the next president or government. Patarkatsishvili's campaign seeks maximum voter support in order to reduce the likely majority that would vote to re-elect Mikheil Saakashvili as president. With Saakashvili the distant front-runner in a split field of candidates, the opposition expects to reduce the margin of Saakashvili's anticipated victory, and on that basis to cry fraud and contest the outcome. Patarkatsishvili's egregious populism (and that of other candidates without personal resources) is a tool in that strategy.

Opposition leaders have openly stated in Georgian media that they are already focusing on preparations for protests on January 6, rather than the January 5 election. From London, Patarkatsishvili is in discussions with representatives of the nine-party opposition alliance about financing pre- and post-election efforts (Rustavi-2, Civil Georgia, Prime-News, December 1-13).

Patarkatsishvili's socioeconomic program is the latest phase in his effort to leverage his wealth into control of Georgia's political system through regime change. He had in October announced his readiness to finance the activities of the nine-party opposition alliance and his availability to lead the opposition. On October 17 he and the opposition alliance released convergent programs. Patarkatsishvili called for turning Georgia into a "federation" of 10 provinces (other than Abkhazia and South Ossetia), maximizing provincial powers while minimizing those of the central government, abolishing the institution of the presidency, introducing a constitutional monarchy in the future, and hinting at a dual-vector foreign policy to replace Georgia's Western orientation (see EDM, October 26, November 5, 12).

Patarkatsishvili's constitutional proposals would turn the Georgian state into a dysfunctional entity, with a government of doubtful legitimacy, whose leaders he might in that case control -- unless uncontrollable disorder prevails in Georgia under this prescription. His socioeconomic program would derail the reforms in a country ranked by the World Bank among the world's most successful reforming countries in 2006 and whose performance continued as strongly this year.

---