



Human Rights and other public organizations collectively address to the International organizations concerning the alarming processes in the Adjara Public Broadcaster

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Dunja Mijatović,

EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Eamon Gilmore,

EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, Mr. Toivo Klaar,

Members of the European Parliament,
OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr. Harlem Désir
Executive director of Article 19, Ms. Quinn McKew,
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Amnesty International Acting Secretary General, Ms. Julie Verhaar,
Human Rights Watch Executive Director, Mr. Kenneth Roth,
European Broadcasting Union President, Mr. Tony Hall,
Freedom House President, Mr. Michael J. Abramowitz
Secretary General, Reporters without Borders, Mr. Christophe Deloire
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Chair-person of International Press institute, Mr. Markus Spillmann
Free Press unlimited, Mr. Leon Willems

We, the human rights organizations and groups defending the freedom of the media, express our extreme concern about the alarming processes taking place within the Adjara Public Broadcaster (APB), and kindly ask you to take action within the scope of your mandate, and provide support for the independence of the APB.

The new director of the Adjara Public Broadcaster was elected through dubious procedures and within suspicious contexts, following the arbitrary impeachment of the previous director, Natia Kapanadze. Over the last month, the new director [has weakened](#) the Broadcaster's News section - the key group responsible for creating critical content, and has fired the staff from influential positions or transferred them to less important jobs.

Specifically, on February 2nd, 2020, due to the limitations placed on her contractual

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duties, and after several severe incidents of workplace harassment and control, **Natia Zoidze**, Deputy Broadcasting Director, left APB. Following the alterations made to the staff list and deliberate structural changes taken by the Advisory Board in violation of the procedures and public administration guidelines, on February 19th, 2020, **Maia Merkviladze** was transferred from the position of Deputy Chief of the Information Department, with responsibility for News Editorial, to the Radio Broadcasting Service. On February 28th, 2020, the director dismissed **Shorena Glonti** from the position of head of the News Service after an arbitrary and groundless disciplinary persecution. On March 6th, 2020, the Director, without adhering to disciplinary rules and procedures, temporarily suspended Chief News Presenter Teona Bakuridze from performing her contractual obligations and took her off air in response to her critical discussion with a new Acting Head of the News Service appointed only a few hours earlier. Later, on March 13th, the director **dismissed Teona Bakuridze** from her position because of the same incident. The director accused Bakuridze of failing to comply with the instructions of her boss, although the new head of news was appointed only several hours prior and had not yet given any instructions to Ms. Bakuridze.

The above decisions, which were applied to those in the editorial team with a critical attitude towards the senior staff and the new management, show obvious indications that editorial independence is being compromised and that APB is being heavily controlled. Additionally, there are instances of [gross violations of labor rights](#). Such a hostile working environment and the series of unfair decisions made by the management of APB provoked a reasonable degree of anxiety among journalists and staff over the danger of extending the practice of [interference](#) into editorial policy and the filtering out of independent staff in the future. They fear that such practices will eventually lead to governmental control over the APB.

The dynamics and contexts of the events that have developed in the APB since spring 2019, including the groundless impeachment of Natia Kapanadze, the problematic rules and [procedures of electing](#) Giorgi Kokhreidze, preceded by APB's criticism from Bidzina Ivanishvili, ruling party founder with outsized influence over Georgia's government. This obviously reveals government's attempts to gain full control over the APB, and aims to weaken the critical thinking and independence of this media space.

The damaging of the independence of the APB will wipe out the open, critical social

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media-space that the APB created, as it has become an open platform for socially disadvantaged and oppressed social groups to represent their needs, concerns and interests, and which makes their voices heard. It is noteworthy, that over the last few years, [international organizations](#) regarded the APB as the most balanced media outlet in Georgia.

Adjara Television was founded in 1987, and operated under institutional subordination to the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. It was granted the status of an independent public broadcaster only in 2013. Historically, the APB has been under the direction and control of the political authorities, and only in recent years it has been able to achieve the real goal of protecting independence and public interest. APB developed its critically minded and socially-oriented approach following the commencement of Natia Kapanadze's directorship.

The independence and critical editorial policy of the APB proved to be unacceptable to the authorities, and the Advisory Board. The board itself is formed in a highly politicized manner - the majority of the council, three out five members are selected by the ruling party. The current board failed to fulfill the obligations specified in the relevant legislation namely to supervise and to respond properly to the questionable and illegal measures taken by the new director.

The authorities began with impeaching Natia Kapanadze without proper justification in the spring of 2019 and subsequently appointed Giorgi Kokhreidze, a candidate closely associated with the government.

In his very first broadcast, Giorgi Kokhreidze blamed journalists for alienating authorities by asking critical questions and told reporters that they [ought to treat respondents](#) as their "fathers and brothers". It is noteworthy that the leaders of the ruling party, including Bidzina Ivanishvili, Irakli Kobakhidze, the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, and Tornike Rizhvadze, the head of the Adjara Autonomous Republic, accused the APB journalists of being in league with the opposition, and called upon them to "calm down." These statements by government officials are part of the government's policy of polarizing and radicalizing political processes. However, given the [recent developments](#) in Adjara broadcasting, the whole situation creates the impression of a pre-organized political process, directed against the independence of the APB.

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It is clear that the processes taking place in the APB should be seen in the context of the wider political environment, where it is obvious that the government's interest is to weaken critically-minded political and media groups as a way to maintain its power and to take control over them. Over the recent months, Georgian public has witnessed questionable legal processes and hostile rhetoric of ruling party representatives against other critical media outlets such as TV Pirveli, Mtavari TV and Formula TV.

It is worth pointing out that about 100 employees of the APB have set up an alternative trade union in response to the ongoing processes, and have started a [collective dispute](#) on labor rights against the management. The process of negotiation between the parties should begin shortly, with participation of an independent mediator designated by the State; within this negotiation, the parties need to reach a reasonable and just agreement. Failure of the mediation process would legitimately enable APB journalists to exercise their right to strike as a mean of continuing the dispute. Their pre-strike demands include the return of unlawfully dismissed and transferred employees to their former positions, the creation of institutional security for editorial independence, the protection of working conditions and the long-term strategic development of the APB. Such self-organization of journalists to defend their rights and protect the underlying principles of a public broadcaster could be perceived as a unique and historic instance of a struggle for the labour rights, for the freedom of expression and media independence.

Considering the processes taking place in the APB and their full political and media context, we respectfully ask you:

1. To actively engage and study the processes related to the violation of political, editorial and labor rights in the Adjara Public Broadcaster and raise the issue of the APB with the Government of Georgia in all relevant political and international formats;
2. To take all appropriate measures within your remit (public statement, appeal to the government, etc.) to safeguard the rights and freedom of expression of the journalists working at the Adjara Public Broadcaster, and to halt processes that threaten the independence of the free media.

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Signatory Organizations:

1. Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC)
2. New confederation of independent unions
3. Open Society Georgia Foundation
4. Georgian Journalistic Ethics Charter
5. Georgian Young Lawyers' Association
6. Transparency International Georgia
7. International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)
8. Georgian Regional Media Association
9. TV network
10. Media Club
11. Publika
12. OC-media
13. Batumelebi
14. Chai Khana
15. Community radio Marneuli
16. Salam platform
17. Batomi Society
18. Union of Georgian Muslims
19. Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI)
20. Alliance of Regional Broadcasters
21. Liberal Academy Tbilisi
22. Georgian Small and Medium Telecommunications Operators Association
23. Georgia's Democratic initiative (GDI)
24. Partnership for Human Rights (PHR)
25. Democracy Research Center (DRC)
26. Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI)
27. Union Sapari
28. Women's initiatives support group (WISG)
29. Equality Movement
30. Human Rights Center (HRC)
31. Media Development Foundation (MDF)
32. Human Rights Center (HRC)
33. Governance Monitoring Center (GMC)

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34. Network of Centers for Civic Engagement (NCCE)
35. Civil Society Institute (CSI) Batumi Branch
36. Community Development Academy (CDA)
37. Independent Journalists' House (IJH)
38. Green Sector (GS)