

European Parliament Adopts Critical Resolution On Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Georgia

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

On June 8, following the "Violations of media freedom and safety of journalists in Georgia" debate held in the European Parliament, the legislature adopted a critical resolution on media freedom in Georgia. The resolution was initiated by 5 political groups of the European parliament, with overall 308 members of the European Parliament (MEPs) voting for the resolution and 218 against it.

The resolution focuses on the 'extremely' tense relations between the ruling party and critical media outlets. The European Parliament expresses its concern "over the significant deterioration of the media situation and the safety of journalists in Georgia in recent years". It calls on the Georgian authorities to "refrain from interfering in media freedom or pursuing politically motivated judicial cases against media owners or representatives" and also to refrain from using aggressive rhetoric and discriminatory treatment toward media representatives in Georgia.

Other key issues pointed out in the resolution are - the lack of transparency and effectiveness in investigations related to crimes against journalists, the death of Aleksandre Lashkarava, a TV Pirveli cameraman, a few days after being assaulted on July 5; Significant downgrading of Georgia in the World Press Freedom Index ranking from 60th to 89th place over the year; Journalists, particularly those from media channels critical of the government, facing difficulties in accessing public information; Alleged spying on journalists by the security services.

The resolution also focuses on imposing personal sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the former Prime Minister of Georgia, "for his role in the deterioration of the political process in Georgia". The European Parliament also expresses its concern over Ivanishvili's exposed personal and business links to the Kremlin, which, according to EP, determine the Georgian government's position towards sanctions on Russia.

"[EP] expresses its concern over the destructive role played by the sole oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili, in Georgia's politics and economy, and the level of control he exerts over the government and its decision," reads the resolution.

The resolution also calls on the Georgian authorities to release former president Mikhail Saakashvili from prison on humanitarian grounds in order to allow him to undergo proper medical treatment abroad.

The document expressed its concern over "the steady rise" in Russian disinformation and information manipulation in Georgia, in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The resolution called on the Georgian authorities to resolutely uphold the highest standards of democracy, the rule of law, judicial independence, fair trials, and fundamental freedoms, including in the area of media freedom.

The Chairman of the ruling Georgian Dream party Irakli Kobakhidze has criti-



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cized the European Parliament resolution, noting that the document was "not worth a dime". According to him, the resolution, which demands the release of Saakashvili and Gvaramia, "who are the enemies of media freedom and democracy in Georgia", and also names Bidzina Ivanishvili as the main problem of democracy in Georgia "has nothing to do with European values".

Kobakhidze noted that Ivanishvili was "completely distanced" from politics, and noted that he was the person who made fundamental progress in the direction of democracy, human rights, and media freedom since 2012.

Kobakhidze called it "extremely disturbing" that a high-ranking institution of the European Union "falls victim to fake news", claiming that the resolution included factual errors and lies.

"The campaign, which has been running since 2012 to protect criminals and restore them to power, has reached one of the EU's highest institutions, the European Parliament," he noted.

Kobakhidze also cited reforms implemented by the Georgian Dream government, stating that because of those reforms Georgia was placed "ahead of Ukraine, Moldova and many other EU

member or candidate countries" in terms of democracy and the rule of law, the fight against corruption, and trade and economic cooperation with the Union.

For the record, Georgia is still waiting for the European Commission to deliver its opinion on the country's EU candidacy bid soon, with the European Council expected to make a final decision by the end of June.

Yesterday, the leaders of the Political Groups of the European Parliament have appealed to European Council members to decide on the applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia to accede to the European Union. The joint statement reads that the European Union "must show courage, resolve, and vision in today's context of a brutal war of aggression against our European neighbor Ukraine and a deteriorating international environment."

According to the leaders, the European Union must be a reliable partner and a credible geopolitical actor that lives up to its principles and values by showing solidarity with those who stand up for the same ideals. The letter also reads that Ukrainian, Georgian and Moldovan citizens "wish to live in a free, democratic and prosperous country that is a proud and committed member of the European family" and these expectations "should not continue to be neglected."

With the joint letter, the leaders of the European Parliament appealed to the Council to grant the candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova as a start to a "merit-based process", and to "work towards" granting the same status to Georgia.

EXCHANGE RATES: US DOLLAR - 2.9634 | EURO - 3.1785 | GBP - 3.7152 | 100 RUSSIAN RUBLE - 4.8919 | SWISS FRANC - 3.0313 |

10 NGOs Call on Presidents to Veto the Amendment to Covert Surveillance Law



BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Ten local watch-dogs are addressing the President with the request to veto the law which increases the scope of crimes allowing for covert investigative actions and the duration of these actions. According to them, the amendment does not meet international standards.

On June 7, the Parliament supported the legislative changes to the Criminal Code of Georgia proposed by Georgian Dream MPs in April 2022, which “significantly worsens the standard of human rights protection during covert investigative actions. The adopted law is not in line with international human rights norms and the practice of the European Court of Human Rights.”

According to the non-governmental organizations the proposed changes are characterized by a number of shortcomings, especially the new rules related to the term covert investigations and notification of covert investigations, in particular, secret hearings on individuals can be carried out in case of 77 offenses indefinitely, without them being aware for 30 years, or ever. Consequently, the individual is deprived of exercising his right to appeal, his right to a fair trial, or his right to privacy.

Under the legislative changes, the maximum possible surveillance period will be extended from 6 months to 9 months, and 27 less serious crimes will be added to the list of crimes on which covert surveillance activities can be carried out.

“The legislation on wiretapping is already characterized by a number of shortcomings, including those that could not be addressed by the 2014 reform. That is why non-governmental organizations and about 300 citizens of Georgia have appealed to the Constitutional Court against the legislation regulating covert investigative actions. The Constitutional Court has already considered the case on the merits, however, the court has been delaying the final decision for 4 years. Against this background, the further deterioration of human rights standards in the legislation is clearly a step backward in terms of Georgia’s democratic development. This is indicated by the statement issued by the EU delegation on June 8,” the statement said.

Therefore, the organizations call on President Salome Zurbishvili to veto the legislative changes and return them to the parliament with remarks.

EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell has raised concerns, saying

that while there may be legitimate security grounds, the changes “significantly reduce Georgian citizens’ right to privacy”. He called on the Parliament to immediately ask the Venice Commission for an Opinion on this legislation and follow its recommendations.

“We take note of the fact that Georgia continues to introduce important legislative amendments through rushed Parliamentary processes, without the necessary domestic or international consultations and without properly analyzing their compliance with European standards.”

Referring to the alleged leaked files from the State Security Services (SSG), suggesting that the authorities were spying on the clergy, civil society, journalists, and foreign diplomats, among others, EU Diplomat stressed that the Georgian government needs to inform the Diplomatic Community of the results of the promised investigation into the reported massive wiretapping of Georgian and foreign citizens, as revealed in September 2021. The head of the EU Mission to Georgia urged the Government to uphold its commitments to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Georgian citizens, as well as to ensure adequate and effective safeguards against their potential abuse.

NEWS IN BRIEF

PREPARED BY THE MESSENGER STAFF

Zurbishvili Pays Visit to Brussels

President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili is in Brussels. She is taking part in a conference on ‘Women in Conflict’ at the invitation of European Council President Charles Michel. According to the presidential administration, the international conference in Brussels is attended by women leaders and women affected by conflicts, including First Lady of Ukraine Olena Zelenska, Executive Director of the UN Women Sima Sam Bahus, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad.

“The event, hosted by the UN Women, Nadia’s Initiative, and the Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation, will focus on the importance of women leaders in times of conflict, the realization of the rights of women and girls, and the need for their full participation in peace processes,” the statement said.

Lomjaria Says She Spoke with Zurbishvili Shortly after Gvaramia’s Verdict

Public Defender Nino Lomjaria says that shortly after the announcement of the verdict of the General Director of the Main Channel Nika Gvaramia, she spoke with President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili. According to Lomjaria, she confirmed to the President at the meeting that he was ready to provide information on the legal circumstances of Nika Gvaramia’s case.

“I had personal communication with Salome Zurbishvili, where I confirmed that I was ready to meet with Nika Gvaramia in this case and provide information about the legal circumstances, for which he thanked me, but we did not agree on the exact time and place. My offer still stands. The conversation took place right after the verdict was announced,” Lomjaria said.

Public Defender of Georgia Nino Lomjaria addressed President Zurbishvili today with a request to pardon the General Director of the Main Channel, Nika Gvaramia. The ombudsman published the results of the examination of Nika Gvaramia’s verdict, stating that the court’s reasoning is unfounded in terms of both conviction and sentencing. On May 16, the Tbilisi City Court found Nika Gvaramia, General Director of the Main Channel, guilty and sentenced him to 3 years and 6 months in prison. The prosecutor’s office accused Nika Gvaramia, the founder of the main channel, of embezzling a large amount of property belonging to the TV station, commercial bribery, making and using a forged official document, as well as legalizing illegal income, while he was still the director of Rustavi 2.

FRIDAY		JUNE 10	
Day		Showers and thunderstorms	High: 28°C
Night		Showers	Low: 18°C
SATURDAY		JUNE 11	
Day		Showers	High: 27°C
Night		Partly cloudy	Low: 18°C

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43, Chovelidze st., Tbilisi,
0108, Georgia

Founded by Prof.
Zaza Gachechiladze
Tamar Gachechiladze
Publisher

Phone: +995 99 56 56 21; +995 77 76 00 00
E-mail: messenger@messenger.com.ge
<http://www.messenger.com.ge/>

Nino Metreveli
Commercial Director

Mariam Mchedlidze
Editor-in-Chief

Nino Kavelashvili
Design and Layout

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