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Europe/Ex-USSR - Georgia

Battle for TV

Urgent need to guarantee public broadcaster's independence

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Reporters Without Borders urges the Georgian authorities to carry out badly needed reforms to ensure the independence of the country's public radio and TV broadcaster, [GPB](#) (Общественный вещатель Грузии).

"The politically-motivated dismissals of recent weeks underline the urgency of the need to depoliticize the appointments of GPB's executives and guarantee the independence of the radio and TV stations it oversees," Reporters Without Borders said.

"We fervently hope that [the proposed broadcasting law](#) that was recently submitted to parliament will provide the necessary guarantees. Journalists must be free to work without political interference in both public and commercial broadcast media. The presidential election next October makes this all the more urgent."

Georgia has had a president and prime minister from rival political coalitions since [last October's parliamentary elections](#), which were won by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, a bitter opponent of President Mikheil Saakashvili. Political rivalry is now focused on next October's presidential election, in which Saakashvili cannot run for another term.

GPB director-general Georgiy Chanturiya was fired and replaced by Georgiy Baratashvili shortly after last October's elections. On 28 February, Baratashvili [fired](#) news director **Khatuna Berdzenishvili** (Хатуна Бердзенишвили), who is said to be supporter of President Saakashvili's National Movement.

But then, on 4 March, [Baratashvili was fired](#) by GPB's board of governors, of which the majority supports President Saakashvili. The governors are nominated by the president and appointed by parliament. Baratashvili has announced his intention to challenge his dismissal before the courts.

All this has underscored the already glaring need to reform the way BPG functions. An NGO coalition called Media Advocacy Coalition recently submitted a draft broadcasting law to parliament and its representatives appeared before a parliamentary committee yesterday. The bill is due to come before the chamber in the spring.

The proposed law would change the way GPB's board of governors is appointed, so that it is not controlled by the ruling party. The number of governors would be cut from 15 to nine, of whom two would be appointed by the Ombudsman, three by the party or coalition with a parliamentary majority and three by the other parliamentary parties.

The president of the public radio and TV broadcaster in the autonomous southwestern Republic of Adjara would automatically be the ninth governor. The proposed law also defines the powers of GPB's board of governors and executive, and clarifies the conditions for hiring and firing executive and journalistic staff.

GPB's status was changed from state-owned to public in 2005 but in practice most of its funding still comes directly from the government's budget. GPB currently consists of two TV stations and two radio stations.

Georgia's major commercial TV stations are also the subject of many disputes that are being

accentuated by the elections.

Ownership of *Imedi* TV, a station acquired by supporters of President Saakashvili in 2007, was restored to its original majority shareholder shortly after last October's elections. The judicial authorities then began investigating alleged fraudulent asset transfers and money laundering involving Tbilisi's mayor.

In November, Prime Minister Ivanishvili said he was considering a merger between GPB and TV9, a commercial station launched by his wife earlier in 2012. He subsequently retracted.

In such a polarized media landscape, the issue of transparent financing is crucial. Reporters Without Borders hopes that the proposed reforms will lead to progress in this area as well.

The finance ministry revealed last month that, before the change in government, the three leading pro-Saakashvili TV stations – *Rustavi-2*, *Imedi* and *PIK* – had been spared substantial amounts in taxes.

Georgia is ranked 100th out of 179 countries in the [2013 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

Read our previous statement on Georgia: "[Media face many unknowns after tense election campaign](#)" (1 October 2012)

(Logo: GPB)
