

AUTHORITIES AGREE TO PASS 'MUST-CARRY' RULES

The Georgian authorities made a U-turn and agreed to introduce 'must-carry/must-offer' rules to increase access to information – the proposal, pushed actively by a campaign group of election watchdog and media organizations, which was initially rejected by the ruling party.

Davit Bakradze, the parliamentary chairman, said on June 22, that the authorities were already working on legislative proposals that would create additional "guarantees to allow television stations to reach out larger audience and to expand area of their coverage."

"In particular, the initiative envisages carrying of all television channels by all the cable operators during the electoral period; I want to stress that it will apply to all the television stations and it will be a huge step that will help the population to receive more information," Bakradze told Imedi TV.

The rules, he said, would be in force during the electoral period and a relevant draft of legislative amendments would be tabled in "nearest days".

In May the campaign group, This Affects You Too, uniting election watchdog and legal advocacy organizations, as well as several media outlets, submitted to the Parliament package of legislative amendments, which, among other issues, also envisages amending law on broadcasting to prevent arbitrary treatment of TV channels by cable networks.

The proposal envisages obligating on the one hand, cable operators to carry TV channels with news programming and on the other hand also obligating TV channels themselves to make their content available to all the cable operators.

The proposal echoes existing situation on the market, wherein some TV stations are denied by some cable networks to be carried to their subscribers, while some TV channels have themselves refused to be carried by one of the cable providers.

Currently Tbilisi-based Maestro TV is not available in packages offered by one of the largest cable networks, Silk TV, as well as by Caucasus TV, which Maestro TV says is a politically-motivated decision on the part of these companies. Channel 9, a television station owned by

Georgian Dream opposition coalition leader Bidzina Ivanishvili's wife, has been denied to be carried by all the cable operators, except of one, Global TV, which is co-owned by Ivanishvili's brother.

Global TV itself cannot carry several TV channels, including two largest and most watched nationwide broadcasters – Imedi TV and Rustavi 2 TV, after they requested the Global TV to suspend their transmission, citing commercial reasons. Global TV, however, said it was done deliberately to encourage its subscribers to switch to other cable operators and to discourage potential new clients from subscribing with Global TV with an eventual goal to limit number of households with access to Channel 9's broadcasts, which is also available via satellite and internet.

Lawmakers from the ruling party said the proposal was not acceptable, citing that imposing additional obligations on cable operators and television stations would amount to meddling in private businesses and it was up to companies themselves to agree between each other on the matter based on their commercial interests.

Davit Bakradze, the parliamentary speaker, said on June 22, that although it was "a purely" commercial issue between the private companies, electoral period was "a special" situation and for that reason it was decided by the authorities "to obligate" companies "to reach an agreement between each other that would eventually benefit voters through receiving more information." He said that for that reason it was decided to make 'must carry/must offer' rules applicable only during "the electoral period."

Bakradze's remarks came shortly after Deputy Interior Minister Eka Zguladze, who is also a member of Inter-Agency Task Force for Free and Fair Elections (IATF) at the National Security Council of Georgia, announced that government was in consultations with the Parliament about "additional initiatives" in order "to ease receiving diverse information for voters."

Zguladze made the announcement while making a statement about seizure of Global TV's satellite dish antennas from the company's warehouses. She said that the move was related to ongoing investigation into alleged vote-buying and it had nothing to do with restricting access to information.

SPY CAMERA IN PLASTIC FLOWER

Wiretapping equipment discovered at the meeting of Armenian Diaspora and political parties



It has been reported that hidden spy camera and tapping equipment were detected at the meeting of Tbilisi Armenian Diaspora and Georgian political parties. The discovery was made only after the chambermaid asked the participants to take their respective items with them.

The meeting took place at the Old Metekhi Hotel of Tbilisi City. It was dedicated to the ethnic minorities. The event consisted of two parts. The first one featured presentations and the other included discussions. The latter part was closed to journalists. The meeting was attended by the representatives of Armenian Diaspora and three political parties – Free Georgia, Democratic Movement – United Georgia, Republican Party.

The administration of the Old Metekhi Hotel declined to comment. Yet, one of its staff members told us in private that the organizers booked the meeting hall in advance and that the hotel administration does not control in-out transfer of items by the clients. Accordingly, they are not aware who

delivered flower pots into the conference hall.

The conference was also attended by Kakha Kukava's and Nino Burjanadze's parties, as well as the Republicans. Basically the agenda addressed the problems of concern for the Armenian community. The political parties made informal presentations of their views on the ways of solving minority problems and generally, on political processes.

It turns out that before the conference organizers issued a press release, informing that the discussion part of the event would be held behind-the-doors, i.e. closed to journalists. After the end of the conference, the chambermaid approached and asked the organizers to take items that belonged to them. In the items she meant the plastic pot filled with plastic flowers. The organizers replied that the flowers were not theirs. Then it was discovered that an hour before the start of the conference, three unknown men entered the hotel with the pot and identified themselves as event organizers. Then they walked into the conference hall and quietly left the hotel in 10-15 minutes.

VISITOR'S VIEW

THROUGH THE GREEN

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think about anything else to say. The man was in a big hurry and ran back to his car soon after. So there we stood, in the middle of six other fruit stands on the street with a basket that could feed us for a week.

We made friends quickly. We shared strawberries with the family who allowed us to camp on their field for a night. The children were curious and when Roberto joined their football match, they all wanted to be in his team.

The Georgians that we met on the way, have always been very helpful. They asked if we were lost, needed help or ran out of water in the heat. Even a police car stopped us just to ask if we were alright.

When we asked for a place to camp, a woman was eager to help us but she did not know any English, Spanish or German. She smiled while she got angry with herself: "All

these years they taught me Russian at school and now I finally get to meet some



Photos by Roberto Gallegos Ricci

tourists and they do not speak it!" Her daughters Nino and Maria spoke English and showed us the village's football field, where we camped for a night.

After several days of cycling on main

roads we decided to get to know the countryside and move to a side road. We enjoyed some kilometers of good pavement, no traffic, no blowing horns and thousands of colorful flowers to both sides of the way. Asking for the way to Gori we were sent back to the main road – just in time! This was where the freeway towards Tbilisi started. The last 80 kilometers we cycled in high speed. There was a big shoulder just for ourselves and we did not have to avoid cows, pigs, chicken and pedestrians anymore.

We spent nearly two weeks getting to know the capital city. We watched the Georgian Rugby team Lelos win against Ukraine, ate kilos of Khinkali (Roberto still loses half his juice but I learned to eat them), bought bicycle parts at the Dry Bridge market and still we did not see all that we wanted to in this beautiful country. But we have made many friends along the way. Both are good reasons to come and visit Georgia again.