

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Concerns over sudden closure of Greece's Public Broadcaster

Amnesty International wishes to express its concern over the sudden closure of Greece's Public Broadcaster (ERT) last week and the implications of this measure for the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek and receive information, particularly at a time of a serious economic and political crisis. While the authorities have announced plans for the establishment of a new Public Broadcaster in August, for the time being, many people, in Greece and abroad, who relied on ERT for a range of information on political developments and for other content in the Greek language, are currently deprived of it.

Particular groups affected by the sudden closure include people living in remote areas of Greece for whom ERT was in practice the only available Greek TV channel, and people of Greek origin living abroad who view ERT as an important link with the country and their cultural and linguistic heritage.

In its role as a public non-commercial broadcaster, ERT played a significant part in the overall plurality and diversity of the media in Greece. As the UN Human Rights Committee has pointed out, governments should ensure and promote plurality and diversity of the media, as part of their obligation to ensure the right to freedom of expression set out in Article 19 ICCPR, which includes the right to seek and receive information and ideas of all kinds. Instead, at least for the time being, the government's decision to close ERT has, effectively reduced the diversity and plurality of information and ideas available.

Amnesty International notes that, despite the implications of the closure for freedom of expression and information, the decision to close ERT was taken by the government by means of an act of legislative content, apparently without any prior consultation with Parliament or with the minority parties in the government coalition.

Background

In the late evening of Tuesday 11 June 2013, the Greek authorities switched off the signal of the Greek Public Broadcaster's (ERT). Earlier that afternoon, a Greek government spokesman announced that ERT was going to be closed down at midnight and its 2,600 employees would be dismissed. Amongst the reasons cited for the closure were extravagant costs that the country could not afford during the financial crisis. Staff reported that they were not provided with any information prior to the closure and did not have the opportunity of consultation with the government and their management.

The act of legislative content for the closure of ERT was signed by Ministers of the majority party (New Democracy) in the government coalition but not by the other two coalition partners.

Following the announcement and during the past week ERT workers have staged protests outside the ERT building in Athens. They were joined by several thousands of people objecting to the closure. ERT

staff also continued to broadcast over the internet with the assistance of the European Broadcasting Union which set up a satellite news gathering operation outside the ERT building.

The closure created a serious crisis among the government coalition, with the Socialist Party (PASOK) and Democratic Left (DIMAR) demanding the immediate reopening of ERT and rebuffing the Prime Minister's Antonis Samaras proposal last Friday, following the public outcry against ERT's closure, for it to resume broadcasts with a smaller number of staff. The Prime Minister then returned to his original positions while PASOK and DIMAR stated that while there was need to restructure ERT, that should take place while it remained open. A meeting is scheduled between the government partners on Monday 17 June 2013, for a solution to be found.

Concerns about the closure were also expressed by various international bodies such as Nils Mouznieks, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights who reportedly stated that the decision to close ERT "sends a chilling signal to the media and stirs tensions in a country already suffering from a serious financial and social crisis" and that even "a temporary closure reduces media pluralism and curtails freedom of expression".

Communities in remote areas of Greece such as Epirus villages and Aegean islands where ERT was the only Greek language channel that could be received clearly, also expressed their objections over ERT's closure.

On 12 June 2013, the Union of ERT workers (POSPERT) filed an application to the Council of State requesting the annulment of the act of legislative content ordering its closure and for the issuance of a temporary order suspending the above mentioned decision. The announcement of the Court's findings regarding the temporary suspension of ERT's closure is expected on 18 June.