

# OPEN LETTER

To Geoffrey Macnab and the Editors of Screen International

*When the Headline Comes Before the Facts*

Full Official Version



## NEWS

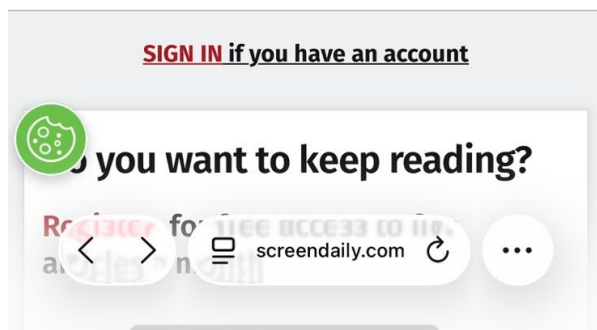
### Georgian organisations claim state festivals are being hijacked by “authoritarian regime”

BY GEOFFREY MACNAB | 21 JULY 2026



SOURCE:  
IFFR

Top Georgian groups say international guests are being used as “useful idiots”.



Screenshot of the original ScreenDaily version. The phrase “useful idiots” was later removed from the page without notice.

**Re: Geoffrey Macnab's article, "Georgian organisations claim state festivals are being hijacked by 'authoritarian regime'", published by Screen International on 21 July 2026.**

Dear Mr Macnab,

Dear Editors of Screen International,

The central problem with your article appears before the first sentence: it is built into the headline chosen by Screen International.

The headline does not simply introduce the facts. It tells the reader, before any evidence is presented, how those facts should be understood. It treats "state festivals" as an established category and places the Svaneti International Film Festival DALI inside it.

DALI was not founded by the state, is not run by the state and does not take its programme from the state. It was created and is managed by filmmakers. Over the years, it has received support from public institutions, private companies and independent partners.

Public or municipal support does not amount to state ownership, control of the programme or political obedience.

A film that receives a public grant does not become a "state film". Nor does a European festival become a government event simply because it receives municipal support.

This is not a minor point of wording. It is a classification that replaces fact with inference and delivers the conclusion before the evidence.

## **Accuracy, Verification and Fairness**

The basic obligations of journalism are not complicated: accuracy, independent verification, a clear distinction between fact and opinion, a genuine right of reply, and the prompt, visible correction of errors.

None of these standards is satisfied simply because an editor sent an email and received a formal response.

You did contact the festival team. The question, therefore, is not whether communication took place. The question is whether you asked the specific questions on which the accuracy of your headline depended.

- Whether DALI was founded or is run by the state;
- Who sets the festival programme and selects the jury;
- Whether any state body has control over the programme or editorial decisions;
- Whether there has been pressure over discussion topics, guest selection or the views expressed by guests;
- What specific fact supports the claim that the festival is under state control or has been "hijacked".

If these questions were not asked, contacting the festival cannot be described as a meaningful verification of the headline's central premise.

If they were asked and answered, then it is reasonable to ask why those answers did not alter the headline or the article's framing.

A request for comment does not, by itself, make a report fair. Fairness requires the response to address the actual allegation and to be reflected honestly in the framing of the piece.

## **The Word "Claim" Does Not Remove Editorial Responsibility**

**The word "claim" does not relieve an editor of responsibility.**

The allegation may belong to a third party, but the headline, the choice of words, the weight given to quotations, the political framing and the main points of emphasis are Screen International's editorial decisions.

Screen International did more than repeat a statement. It gave that statement a headline, international reach and the authority of a leading trade publication.

The headline ceased to be an introduction and became a verdict. The article that followed was then read through that verdict.

## **“Useful Idiots”: A Label with Professional Consequences**

The original version of the article carried the following line:

**“Top Georgian groups say international guests are being used as ‘useful idiots’.”**

That line has since disappeared from the page. Removing it was the right decision, but its removal does not undo the effect of its publication.

More importantly, “useful idiots” is not merely an insult. It directly undermines the guests’ professional judgement and independence.

It casts the guests as easily manipulated, the festival as a vehicle for political manipulation, and its founders and organisers as the people carrying it out.

The phrase proves nothing, but it can still do real damage. It creates suspicion without supplying evidence, and it gains force simply by appearing in a respected publication.

In the international film industry, reputation is not cosmetic. It influences who attends, who offers support and who agrees to become a partner, jury member, sponsor or programmer.

That is why the casual use of such a term is so serious. A phrase can be removed from a webpage in seconds; the doubt it leaves among partners, funds, sponsors and future guests is harder to remove.

Its removal does not erase the impression already created or the responsibility for having published it.

The phrase has gone. Its consequences have not.

The underlying disagreement may be political, but the journalistic obligation remains factual.

## **A Boycott Is a Choice, Not a Loyalty Test**

We do not question the right of any individual or organisation to criticise the government, declare a boycott or end cooperation with state institutions.

But a boycott cannot become a compulsory loyalty test for an entire professional community.

Some Georgian filmmakers - and we stress, some - have chosen to boycott. Others have chosen to continue making films, holding festivals, maintaining international cooperation and preserving opportunities for young filmmakers.

We also continue professional discussions with the Georgian National Film Centre and other public bodies - at times very robust discussions - about the changes we believe are necessary for the Georgian film industry.

That position is also legitimate.

Telling people that only one professional choice is morally acceptable, in the name of defending freedom, is a deeply contradictory way to oppose authoritarian thinking.

## **One Standard for Everyone**

The phrase “Georgian organisations” sounds authoritative, but organisations are made up of individual members.

Were the members informed? Was there an internal discussion? Was there a proper mandate? If the position belongs to only a few individuals, why are they not named in their own right?

There is a reason to ask. Several people associated with the organisations concerned told us they had not known about the statement, while some members of those same organisations support DALI.

It is also relevant whether Screen International checked, from the date the boycott was declared, whether:

- the authors of the statement or members of their organisations continued to work with the Georgian National Film Centre or other public bodies;
- they worked on state-funded films;
- they took part in publicly funded or co-organised festivals and cultural events.

None of this removes anyone's right to criticise. But if public support is treated as a practical necessity for one group and as proof of state control for another, the standard is not consistent; it is selective.

The Georgian film industry does not speak with one voice. Nor should it.

Cultural freedom means a diversity of views, not the right of one group to present its own position as the position of an entire professional community.

## **International Reputation and the Harm Already Visible**

No international guest cancelled their attendance or asked to leave the festival early. But after the article appeared, the tension was noticeable. Private supporters and investors approached us to ask whether we had seen it. The article was translated into Georgian and circulated locally, with the Screen International name used to lend the allegations added credibility. This is therefore not only a hypothetical future risk. The article has already forced the festival to answer questions about its independence and reputation that did not arise from verified facts.

The absence of a cancelled visit or a terminated partnership does not mean that no harm has occurred.

In the film industry, international reputation is a working asset. Damage often begins quietly: with a partner's question, a new doubt, or the sudden need to prove an independence that had not previously been in question. That is what happened here. We found ourselves answering allegations whose impact came less from independently verified facts than from the authority of an international publication.

The article created precisely that risk by placing an independent festival in the context of state control and attaching a label that undermines the professional judgement and independence of its international guests.

The danger lies in the way the article travelled. An independent festival was placed within the frame of "state festivals", its guests were linked to the phrase "useful idiots", and the article was then translated and cited locally as validation from an international trade publication. At that point, the publication's authority did not merely carry the allegation; it amplified it.

## **Professional Discrediting Is Not a Defence of Freedom**

No state body, public or private organisation, professional association or activist group should be able to use inadequately verified allegations to discredit a person or institution and push them informally out of the international professional space.

State censorship is unacceptable. Its private, reputational equivalent is not freedom.

There may be no formal ban, but the effects can still be real: a sponsor keeps its distance, a partner hesitates, a guest decides not to attend, and the festival acquires a toxic label.

That is not the protection of choice. It is a reputational penalty for making the wrong choice in someone else's eyes.

## **What We Ask of Screen International**

1. Correct the headline so that it does not present DALI as a state-controlled festival;

2. Add a prominent editorial note stating that DALI was not founded by the state, is not run by the state and does not take its programme from the state;
3. Publish the festival's response in full on ScreenDaily as a standalone article, clearly linked to and from the original piece;
4. Give the response and correction prominence proportionate to that of the original article;
5. State what verified facts supported presenting DALI within the category of "state festivals";
6. State what questions were put to the festival about state control, interference in the programme and pressure on guests, and how the answers were reflected in the article;
7. Clearly distinguish the views of named individuals from those of entire organisations, their members and the wider Georgian film community;
8. Apologise to the international guests, the festival, its founders and organisers for wording that portrayed the guests as manipulable and the festival as a vehicle for using them.

**Publishing a one-sided statement in an international trade publication does not verify it.**

**A one-sided statement does not become a verified report simply because it carries the Screen International logo.**

## **An Open Invitation**

Finally, Mr Macnab, we personally invite you to the Svaneti International Film Festival DALI.

Come and see for yourself who runs the festival, how the programme is put together, what the participants discuss, and under what supposed "authoritarian pressure" those discussions take place.

Speak to the guests without us present. Attend the discussions. Ask the organisers and the audience any questions you wish.

You may also wish to ask the guests themselves whether they consider themselves "useful idiots".

You may discover that they are experienced, independent professionals who need no one - Georgian activists, the festival or Screen International - to decide on their behalf where they may go or whom they may meet.

Our invitation remains open.

This time, we hope the conclusion will follow the facts rather than precede them.

## **Appendix**

Screenshot of the original ScreenDaily version showing the line later removed without notice: "Top Georgian groups say international guests are being used as 'useful idiots'."