



The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders

The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders unites 30 human rights NGOs in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Network seeks to facilitate creation of a safer and enabling environment for human rights defenders in the South Caucasus and to strengthen their voices in the region and internationally.

Statement of Georgian Human Rights NGOs

26 Feb. '10

Georgian human rights NGOs condemn the smear informational campaign against civil society of Georgia, particularly against human rights NGOs.

We also respond to the information spread by media according to which law enforcement bodies study the activities of the “agents working in non-governmental sector, so called NGOs.” We think this slander statements aim to discredit human rights non-governmental organizations.

Media campaign against non-governmental organizations and human rights defenders has especially intensified since December 10, 2009, the International Day of Human Rights. Government-controlled media outlets released biased telecasts one after another where human rights defenders are declared to be traitors and enemies of Georgian people; they work against public interests. Beforehand, politicians had made critical statements about human rights defenders.

The campaign started on December 10, the International Day of Human Rights. First targets of the campaign was the “Human Rights Priority” (December 10th), “Georgian Young Lawyers Association” (December 12th), the founder of the “Studio Reporter” Vakhtang Komakhidze, the head of the “Union of Disabled Veterans and Wives of Fallen Soldiers” Manan Mebuke and conflict scientist Paata Zakareishvili (December 17th). Similarly plotted features were aired by the media later as well.

Human Rights Commissionaire of CoE Thomas Hammarberg and former Public Defender of Georgia Sozar Subari also became targets of the critic.

In February 2010, the head of the “Studio Reporter” and investigative journalist Vakhtang Komakhidze was warned by the representatives of the government that the life and health of his family members and himself would be under threat if he did not stop his activities (in particular, filming of the documentary, regarding Russian-Georgian war in August). Shortly after, the journalist was forced to seek the political asylum in Switzerland.

Recently, on 22nd of February, the article was published in the newspaper “Versia” (Version) with the headline – “Who is the agent with the code name “Shvartsika” and what coded messages were published on web-sites”.

According to “Versia”, “Counter-Intelligence Department started to expose spies working in Georgia. They have already started working in this field and they particularly focus on the spies of Russian Special Forces. The materials are already collected on spy-network of Russian spies and according to lobby information law enforcement officers will pay particular attention to the spies comfortably sitting in so-called NGOs. It was the main topic of the session at the Parliamentary Committee of Security and Defense. Givi Targamadze’s committee has discussed the increase of funds for intelligence activities.”

After this introduction, the article is about the founder of the Multinational Georgia Arnold Stepanian; the article introduces documents dated by 1993 about gaining Stepanian over by Security Service of Russian Federation; the author of the article claims Stepanian had sent so-called coded messages to them.

It must be noted that throughout 2009 Arnold Stepanian complained about governmental oppression on him several times; he said he was threatened with accusing to be a spy of foreign country unless he stopped his activities.

It is noteworthy that many people are imprisoned in Georgia for espionage though their charges are still doubtful. Among them are expert Vakhtang Maisaia who was detained on May 5, 2009 the day of so-called Mukhrovani Mutiny in the building of Georgian University. Maisaia was accused in espionage of foreign country and court imposed 20-year-imprisonment on him. However, evidences against him were too doubtful and they were obtained and provided to the court through violation.

Creation of South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders is supported by the European Union.

Network is coordinated by Human Rights Center (Georgia), Armenian Helsinki Association (Armenia) and Institute for Reporters Freedom and Safety (Azerbaijan).

Human Rights House Foundation (Oslo, Norway) is the international partner of the Network.

We are afraid that smear campaign launched in December of 2009, abovementioned article published in newspaper Versia and session in parliament might be prediction of hunting on witches. NGOs, human rights defenders and talented people will become victims of this hunting who have critical opinion about governmental policy and openly speak about it.

Undersigned organizations call upon the government of Georgia:

- to study the facts published in the newspaper “Versia” in accordance to the Constitution of Georgia, international treaties and law and to ensure complete transparency of the study results;
- not to allow violation of the rights of non-governmental organizations and human rights organizations to gather, assembly, freedom of expression, transportation, fair trial and other fundamental rights.

Parliamentary Committee of Security and Defense

- to make official public statement and clarify whether they really discussed the issues published in the newspaper Versia.

media outlets

- to act in compliance with professional ethic; to respect the honor and dignity of a person guaranteed by the government of Georgia;
- to refrain from breaching human rights and basic freedoms during their activities.

To Public Defender of Georgia

- to be particularly concerned regarding the smear informational campaign against NGOs and human rights defenders,
- to respond to the campaign within his competence;

The undersigned organizations appeal to international organizations:

- to be particularly attentive about the aggressive informational campaign against NGOs and human rights defenders in Georgia.

Georgian Young Lawyers Association
The Human Rights Center
Article 42 of Constitution
Center for Constitutional Rights
Century 21st
Law for People
Multinational Georgia
Egalitarian Institute
Healthy World
Civil Forum
Women with University Education
Trade Union of Lawyers of Georgia
Caucasian Center of Public Diplomacy
Association for Free Development and Protection of Rights
Democracy Institute
Former Political Prisoners for Human Rights
Association of Regional Media of Georgia
Network for Constitutional Rights

Any organization can sign the statement who shares the idea of the statement. For signature you can call: +995 32 38 46 48; +995 32 38 46 50