



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 on the International Day of Freedom of Expression

May 3, 2010

On May 3rd, the international day of freedom of expression, the members of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders in Georgia – Human Rights Center, Article 42, Center for the Protection of Constitutional Rights and Multinational Georgia - express their deep concern over the fact that journalists represent one those groups of human rights defenders in Georgia, who most often face pressure and intimidation from the authorities.

Death threats, threats and intimidation against family members, physical and verbal abuse (often directly involving state officials), pressure to disseminate and/or abstain from disseminating certain information, artificially hindering distribution of critical newspapers, arbitrary inspections and imposition of fines by tax inspection authorities on media outlets and impunity for those acts are among methods used for silencing public watchdogs in Georgia.

Denial of access to public information has become a systematic problem. Although the law allows appealing a denial of public information in courts, expenses to be incurred by the applicant constitute a serious barrier for pursuing journalists' interests in courts. Moreover, state organs so often deny public information to journalists or provide inadequate answers to their public information requests, that it exceeds available human resources to litigate each and every case before the courts; it would imply that journalists do nothing, but appeal those cases in the court.

Use of "softer" means to tame critical media further creates challenges. These include political control and interferences within the advertisers' choices to place their advertisements in certain media depended on the safety" of their content i.e. their political acceptability for the government, as well as selective approach of some government representatives cooperating only with those journalists and media outlets who take a pro-government position.

Investigative journalists have been facing particularly severe pressure during the last years.

Recent examples of pressure and intimidation of journalists are the cases of **Vakhtang Komakhidze** (2010), an investigative journalist who received death threats after publicly announcing that he was working on a documentary about the August war 2008,¹ the case of **Saba Tsitsikashvili** (2010) who was physically abused, when the journalist was trying to

¹ For details see:

http://www.caucasusnetwork.org/admin/editor/uploads/files/pdf/Komakhidze_FINAL_ENG.pdf

obtain public information, and obstructed from carrying out his professional activities in the premises of Shida Kartli Regional Administration by the guards of the administration,², pressure by law enforcement officials against journalists of a regional magazine “**Batumelebi**” - **Tedo Jorbenadze and Natia Rokva** (2009),³ etc.

Journalists faced pressure, physical and verbal abuse by state officials as well as some demonstrators during spring-summer demonstrations in Tbilisi (2009); some representatives of law enforcement bodies were involved in severe violations of journalists’ physical security and integrity during the demonstrations.

Human Rights Center, Article 42, Center for the Protection of Constitutional Rights and Multinational Georgia call upon the Georgian authorities to:

- Ensure safe and enabling environment for journalists;
- Ensure accessibility of public information to journalists;
- Prevent all forms of pressure and illegal interferences in journalists’ activities;
- Investigate incidents against journalists effectively and ensure accountability of perpetrators.

² For details see:

http://www.caucasusnetwork.org/admin/editor/uploads/files/pdf/statement_saba.pdf

³ For details see: <http://www.caucasusnetwork.org/index.php?a=main&pid=100&lang=eng>

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Network is coordinated by Human Rights Center (Georgia), Armenian Helsinki Association (Armenia) and Legal Education Society (Azerbaijan). Human Rights House Foundation (Oslo, Norway) is the international partner of the Network.