

Saakashvili's Photographer Held

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Saakashvili's personal photographer Irakli Gedenidze in a file photo. **Vano Shlamov**

TBILISI, Georgia — The personal photographer of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and three other photojournalists were arrested Thursday and accused of spying for a foreign country.

The arrests appeared to fall under what Georgia's Interior Ministry calls an effort to root out Russian spy networks since the two countries fought a brief war in August 2008 over the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

Presidential photographer Irakli Gedenidze, his photographer wife Natia, Zurab Kurtsikidze of the Frankfurt-based European Pressphoto Agency and freelancer Giorgi Abdaladze were taken in the middle of the night by police who searched their homes and seized computers, equipment and mobile phones, relatives told Reuters.

The Interior Ministry said they were accused of passing information obtained through their professional activities "to an organization acting under cover of the special service of a foreign country, to the detriment of the interests of Georgia."

Kurtsikidze's lawyer, Nino Andriashvili, said in an interview: "He is in quite a difficult emotional state because he does not understand the charges and does not accept that he is guilty."

Andriashvili suggested that the charges related to information regarding the president. She said Kurtsikidze's face was bruised.

Associated Press photographer Skakh Aivazov was also detained Thursday, but was released after several hours without being charged.

Media watchdogs accuse the government under Saakashvili of manipulating the media and squeezing press freedoms since taking power after the 2003 Rose Revolution.

Georgia ranks 100th out of 178 countries in the 2010 Press Freedom Index compiled by media watchdog Reporters Without Borders.

Several dozen journalists gathered on Thursday outside the police building where the arrested photojournalists were being held, clutching their pictures.

Some held pictures comparing Saakashvili to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has drawn international condemnation for cracking down on opponents with hundreds of arrests after his disputed re-election last December.

Georgia's Western allies continue to be uneasy over restrictions on media freedom, the concentration of power in the office of the president and the use of the police to discredit political opponents.

Dozens of Georgian citizens have been arrested in the three years since the war on charges of spying for Russia. Taped confessions and secretly recorded evidence have been broadcast on pro-government television channels well before their cases come to trial.

Late Wednesday, nine people, including three Russian citizens, were sentenced in the Georgian port town of Batumi to 11 to 14 years in jail after they were convicted of working for the Russian intelligence services.

Georgian Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili told Ekho Moskv radio on Wednesday that his agency captured most of the Russian spies operating in Georgia, but is still tracking a few who are left. "Georgia has cut 90 percent of the channels that Russian special services had," he said.

Asked about Thursday's arrests in Georgia, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said that they "testify about the level of democracy in Georgia."

"It's not surprising for us that they keep attaching labels and try to cast them as spies," Lukashevich said, Interfax reported.

(Reuters, AP)

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