

Georgian Journalist Says He's Russian Spy

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Georgian photographers taking pictures during a protest outside the Interior Ministry in Tbilisi late Friday.
David Mdzinarishvili

TBILISI, Georgia — The personal photographer to the Georgian president was shown on television Saturday confessing to supplying a colleague with secret information that was then sent to a Russian military intelligence.

Irakli Gedenidze confessed to giving another photographer, Zurab Kurtsikidze of the European Pressphoto Agency, details of the president's itinerary, motorcade route and offices for unspecified remuneration. His wife, Natia, said she knew her husband was friends with Kurtsikidze and sent him the details of his bank account, but she did not confess to taking part in their dealings.

Irakli Gedenidze, Kurtsikidze and photographer Georgy Abdaladze were charged with espionage early Saturday. Natia Gedenidze was accused of abetting espionage and was released on bail, according to a statement from the Georgian government late Saturday.

Georgian Interior Ministry spokesman Georgy Bukhrashvili told reporters Saturday that investigators believe Kurtsikidze had "connections" with Russia's military intelligence unit, GRU, and hired the other two photographers to provide the secret information.

Bukhrashvili said the two men had taken pictures of the secret documents and then sent them to Kurtsikidze to dispatch to Moscow. The photographs were found in the two men's apartments, he said. The Georgian government said Kurtsikidze had contacts with two Russians, Anatoly Sinitsin and Sergei Okrokov, who are wanted for espionage.

The government said investigators found classified images on the computers of Kurtsikidze, Gedenidze and Abdaladze including floor plans of the Presidential Palace and information about the president's itinerary, visits and meetings.

The Interior Ministry said Kurtsikidze asked his colleagues for their banking details to wire fees for providing sensitive information.

European Pressphoto Agency vehemently denied the accusations. EPA editor-in-chief Cengiz Seren said that as part of his work Kurtsikidze "would have had programs of the president's visit and things like that."

Seren that Kurtsikidze was asking his fellow photographers for their banking details so that the agency could wire them money for the photos they took for EPA.

Some photographers in Georgia have worked out a pool system where they can pay a colleague for permission to use a photo taken at an event they were not able to attend. They routinely exchange banking details.

Seren said EPA's accountants are going to find all the documents related to any money that was transferred to Kurtsikidze and to other photographers through him. EPA is going to submit them to the appropriate authority, Seren said in a phone interview from Frankfurt.

The presidential photographer said he had to agree to Kurtsikidze's final request to find information on Georgian secret services after the EPA photographer had started blackmailing him, threatening to make public their earlier dealings.

"I got scared and kept on working with him," he said.

Neither Irakli Gedenidze nor his wife mentioned Abdaladze in their testimony. Abdaladze, who works with the Georgian Foreign Ministry and has freelanced for The Associated Press, denies the espionage charge. The Georgian Interior Ministry, however, played a recording of what they say is a phone conversation between Abdaladze and the EPA photographer, where Kurtsikidze asks him to provide the details of his bank account.

Seren said the agency owed Abdaladze money and wanted to pay him for the pictures he had taken for them.

"Can you image a spy network working like this?" he said.

President Mikheil Saakashvili said in an interview with Ekho Moskvyy radio on Friday that he learned about the spy ring half an hour before the arrests.

"This is not paranoia but it's about the rule of law and equality of everyone," he said of the operation to arrest the journalists. "As for the personal photographer, I got very upset about it and I am still."

Seren said EPA would ask its shareholders, major European news agencies, as well as European institutions to help prove the photographer's innocence.

Neither the Russian Defense Ministry, nor its intelligence unit was available for comment on Saturday.

Several people have been convicted recently by Georgian courts on charges of spying for Russia. In the most recent such ruling on Wednesday, a court in the Black Sea port of Batumi convicted a Russian citizen and eight Georgians of espionage and gave them prison sentences ranging from 11 to 14 years.

The spy flaps have aggravated already tense relations between the two former Soviet republics. Russia has dismissed the spy arrests in Georgia as a fabrication.

The three Georgian photographers are expected to face trial on Sept. 1.

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