The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Using Spy Charges to Help Chill the Media

By Paul Rimple

July 10, 2011



At a news conference Saturday, the Georgian Interior Ministry revealed that European Pressphoto Agency photographer Zurab Kurtsikidze was the nexus of a Russian military intelligence spy ring involving two other Georgian photographers — Irakli Gedenidze, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's personal photographer; and Foreign Ministry photographer Giorgi Abdaladze. The news sent a despondent chill through every journalist in the room.

Accusing people for spying in Georgia is a national pastime. Opposition leaders work for Russia, we are told, while the Saakashvili administration works for George Soros and foreign correspondents are all spooks.

Of course, this all wouldn't be so cliche if there wasn't some basis to it. It's common knowledge that the CIA has hired stringers and freelancers to collect information and plant stories in foreign media. One of Britain's most notorious spies, Kim Philby, was a double

agent and correspondent for The Times, The Economist and The Observer.

Of the dozens of people who have been detained in Georgia for spying for Russia, this is the first time that local journalists have been directly implicated and is the most high-profile case since 2006, when Tbilisi arrested four Russian officers for espionage.

The first instinct is to question whether this is another attempt to intimidate free media. Abdaladze immediately went on hunger strike following his arrest, and Kurtsikidze's employer, EPA, affirms that this is all a misunderstanding. Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders is concerned that the detentions might be some backlash to security paranoia.

The government insists that the case is about national security and not about the photographers' work as journalists.

Nevertheless, many Tbilisi-based journalists are dismayed. Georgia's journalist community is small, and we share information all the time. Who knows when something we have shared could be considered a state secret? We all find it extremely hard to believe that Kurtsikidze, Gedenidze and Abdaladze could have betrayed their country. They should have been at the news conference, not its subject. We want to believe that a mistake has been made and that our colleagues will be vindicated.

Some journalists have taken to protesting, which is unproductive and raises ethical questions. Our job is to establish and verify the facts and then report them objectively. It is the government's job to ensure that there will be a transparent and fair investigation.

Paul Rimple is a journalist in Tbilisi.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/07/10/using-spy-charges-to-help-chill-the-media-a8165