

Foreign Ministry Calls Georgian Spy Arrests 'Hysteria'

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The  **Moscow Times**

The arrest of three photographers by Georgia last week on charges of spying for Moscow was evidence of growing "anti-Russian hysteria" in Tbilisi, the Foreign Ministry said Tuesday.

The trio, one of whom is Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's personal photographer, was the latest of dozens of suspected Russian spies to be arrested by Tbilisi since the two countries fought a brief war over rebel South Ossetia in August 2008.

"I can only state that the anti-Russian hysteria in Tbilisi is again gaining momentum," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said, as Georgian journalists protested against the case for a second day in the Georgian capital.

"The authorities are earnestly convincing the global community and its own population that Georgia is flooded with Russian spies and infiltrators, which brave local special forces are fighting tooth and nail," he said.

Tbilisi has vigorously denied that the case, closely watched by media watchdog groups, is

politically motivated or an attack against press freedoms.

The three accused, Saakashvili's personal photographer Irakli Gedenidze, freelancer Giorgi Abdaladze and Zurab Kurtsikidze of the European Pressphoto Agency, were charged in the early hours of Saturday, their lawyers said.

They were remanded in custody for two months pending trial.

A fourth, Gedenidze's photographer wife, Natia, was released and has declined to talk to reporters.

The case has caused concern among diplomats and shaken the media community in Tbilisi.

On Tuesday, about a group of 100 people, mainly journalists, protested in front of the parliament to demand that the authorities lift the seal of secrecy from the case to ensure transparency. Some held posters that read, "No Pictures, No Democracy."

"Of course I don't think they're guilty, because we haven't had any proof so far of their guilt," said Nino Danelia of an independent nongovernmental organization, the Coalition for Media Advocacy.

Abdaladze issued a statement Monday saying he and Gedenidze had been framed as revenge for pictures that they took on May 26, when police used tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon to end five days of opposition protests and make way for a military parade.

Saakashvili said at the time that he believed Russia was behind the protests.

Abdaladze, who is on a hunger strike, was working at the time as a contract photographer for the Georgian Foreign Ministry and as a staff photographer for the opposition Alia Media group. He filed the pictures with The Associated Press.

Abdaladze and Gedenidze are charged with passing classified documents including the floor plan of the presidential building and the routes and itinerary of Saakashvili's trips to Kurtsikidze, who works for the Frankfurt-based European Pressphoto Agency, or EPA.

Kurtsikidze is accused of passing the documents to the powerful Russian military intelligence service.

But some of the evidence released so far, including secretly recorded telephone conversations, has focused on payment from EPA for photographs taken by Gedenidze and Abdaladze, which Kurtsikidze filed through EPA's Moscow bureau — normal practice for international news agencies.

Police video shows Gedenidze telling investigators that he suspected the material he was providing to Kurtsikidze was destined for an intelligence service, but that Kurtsikidze was blackmailing him.

EPA editor-in-chief Cengiz Seren said he was astonished.

"My God, this reminds me of when I was a young journalist and there were two blocs," he

said, referring to the Cold War.

Referring to the documents alleged to have been found at Kurtsikidze's apartment, he said: "These are things we usually have for that type of coverage. If there is any evidence suggesting this is a spy case ... why don't they produce it?"

In his statement, Abdaladze said, "Photos taken by myself and Irakli [Gedenidze] went all around the world, were published in magazines and newspapers of those countries where Mikheil Saakashvili portrays himself as a great democrat."

The three face prison sentences of eight to 12 years if convicted. Georgian courts last year had an average acquittal rate of 0.2 percent.

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