

3rd Photographer Admits to Spying

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TBILISI, Georgia — The last of three photographers charged with espionage confessed Saturday to spying for Russia, Georgia's Interior Ministry said — a claim that surprised the photographer's own lawyer.

Ramaz Chinchaladze, lawyer for photographer Georgy Abdaladze, said his client insisted on his innocence in a meeting just 10 minutes before the reported confession.

"He insisted that he was innocent, but he confessed later at a meeting with prosecutors and the investigator. We were very surprised," Chinchaladze said in an interview.

Three photographers in Georgia were arrested and charged with spying last week: Irakli Gedenidze, the personal photographer of President Mikhail Saakashvili; Zurab Kurtsikidze of the European Pressphoto Agency; and Abdaladze, who has worked for the Georgian Foreign Ministry and freelanced for The Associated Press.

Gedenidze was shown on television last week confessing to giving EPA photographer Kurtsikidze details of the president's itinerary, motorcade route and offices. Kurtsikidze confessed to spying for Russia on Friday, according to his lawyers.

Several prominent Georgians suggested that Abdaladze and others had been pressured to confess.

The Georgian Interior Ministry said investigators believe that Kurtsikidze had connections with Russia's military intelligence unit, the GRU, and hired the other two photographers to provide secret information.

The government has said investigators found classified images on the photographers' computers, including floor plans of the presidential palace and information about the president's itinerary, visits and meetings.

Eka Beseliya, head of the charity Solidarity with Illegal Prisoners, who also visited Abdaladze in jail Saturday, said in an interview that she believed the photographer had confessed under pressure.

Abdaladze earlier went on hunger strike to protest his arrest and prosecution and even petitioned the Georgian Orthodox patriarch on the subject.

Georgia's most prominent opposition politician said Gedenidze's confession could also be a bogus admission made under pressure.

"Nobody trusts such confessions coming from the arrested," Nino Burdzhnashvili told Russia Today television.

Gedenidze's wife, Natia, was also briefly detained but released shortly before her husband's confession. She is accused of abetting espionage.

The three men face up to 12 years in prison for the charges. Their trial, which starts Sept. 1, and its files are closed to the public.

The secrecy surrounding the case has drawn condemnation from the country's media, which has called on the Interior Ministry to make the trial public.

Georgia's Interior Ministry has fired four police officers for breaches of discipline during the violent dispersal of an anti-government protest in May.

A ministry statement issued Friday said an internal investigation found the four officers to have violated unspecified regulations during their breakup of a May 26 rally along a central boulevard calling for the ouster of President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Ninety people were arrested during the dispersal by riot police wielding water cannon, tear gas and firing rubber bullets, which led to 40 requiring hospital treatment.

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