

7 April 2015

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President of Georgia
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Mr Irakli Garibashvili
Prime Minister of Georgia
7 Ingorokva St, Tbilisi 0114, Georgia²

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Political leaders in Georgia must stop slandering human rights NGOs

Mr President, Mr Prime Minister, Mr Chairperson,

We, the undersigned members and partners of the Human Rights House Network and the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders, call upon political leaders in Georgia to stop slandering non-governmental organisations with unfounded accusations and suggestions that their work would harm the country. Since October 2013, public verbal attacks against human rights organisations by leading political figures in Georgia have increased. The situation is starting to resemble to an anti-civil society campaign.

In October 2013, the Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Energy Resources of Georgia, Kakhi Kaladze, criticised the non-governmental organisations, which opposed the construction of a hydroelectric power plant and used derogatory terms to express his discontent over their protest.³ In May 2014, you, Mr Prime Minister, slammed NGOs participating in the campaign about privacy rights, “This Affects You,”⁴ and stated that they “undermine” the functioning of the State and “damage of the international reputation of the country.”⁵ Such terms do not value disagreement with NGOs and their participation in public debate, but rather delegitimised their work. Further more, the Prime Minister’s statement encouraged other politicians to make critical statements about CSOs and start activities against them.

In January 2015, former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili publicly proclaimed that the activities of the leaders of three larg human rights NGOs, the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, Transparency International Georgia and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, should be “studied”,⁶ thereby implying that their work is either dishonest or illegitimate, or even worse unlawful. Bidzina Ivanishvili is now the head of the NGO Citizen and remains with influence on the current government.

¹ The present letter was also sent by the Presidential Administration’s online form:
<https://www.president.gov.ge/en/SendLetterToThePresident>.

² The present letter was also sent by the Prime Minister’s online form:
http://government.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=378.

³ Statement of the Vice Prime Minister, dated 20 October 2013, available at http://www.myvideo.ge/?video_id=2160865.

⁴ Campaign website available at <http://www.esshengexeba.ge>.

⁵ Statement of the Prime Minister, dated 1 May 2014, available at <http://www.media.ge/ge/portal/articles/302606/>.

⁶ Statement of the former Prime Minister, dated 29 January 2015, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28010http://www.liberali.ge/ge/liberali/news/123407>.

On 17 March 2015, the Member of Parliament from the ruling Georgian Dream Coalition, Gogi Topadze, requested to shut down NGOs in Georgia and suggested to the authorities to take example from other countries, where NGOs do not function at all because they “undermine” the functioning of the States.⁷

Most recently, on 31 March 2015, the Member of Parliament Zviad Dzidziguri, also from the ruling party, expressed that NGOs and media representatives are wiretapping the ruling party. According to him, the ruling party members come across the situation when the discussions at the party meetings are highlighted in detail by media, which makes him concerned that some NGOs and journalists are use wiretapping equipment.⁸ Such accusations of criminal nature are unfounded and contrary to any work method of independent human rights NGOs in Georgia. Again, such accusations aim at slandering NGOs, their credibility and their value in the public debate in Georgia.

This rhetoric by leading political figures of the current parliamentary majority has become increasingly abusive towards civil society groups, and is starting to resemble to an anti civil society campaign. It is in clear violation to commitments made by Georgia in regard to civil society space and the recognition of the important and legitimate role of human rights defenders in the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, according to the resolution 22/6 adopted on 21 March 2013 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. This resolution was co-sponsored by Georgia.

The repeated verbal attacks against NGOs by political leadership hamper the expressed willingness of the government to have inclusive and respectful public debates.

We call upon the Government and the Parliament to create a safe and enabling environment in which human rights defenders can operate free from hindrance and insecurity, in accordance with the Human Rights Council resolution 22/6, paragraph 12. The Government should condemn any signs of smear campaign against human rights defenders and their NGOs.

We hereby call upon you, Mr President, Mr Prime Minister and Mr Chairperson, to refrain from engaging in smear campaigns against civil society organisations. We further call upon you to use the symbolic and the political weight of your offices to express public support for the important role of human rights defenders and the legitimacy of their work, in line with the Human Rights Council resolution 22/6, paragraph 18, as well as the importance of their contribution to the public debate, even if you disagree with it.

Yours sincerely,

Human Rights House Tbilisi (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Article 42 of the Constitution
- Caucasian Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Studies
- Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims
- Human Rights Centre
- Media Institute
- Union Sapari - Family without Violence

Human Rights House Azerbaijan:

- Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan
- *Due to the risk of retaliation against Azerbaijani human rights defenders, we decided not to indicate the names of other Azerbaijani NGOs who would be signing this letter.*

⁷ Statement of Gogi Topadze, dated 5 March 2015, available at http://maestro.ge/menu_id/12/id/18938/lang/1 and <http://17mai.si/2015/03/16/georgia/>.

⁸ More information available at <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/politika/323733-zviad-dzidziguri-etcvobs-rom-saparlamento-umravlesobas-farulad-media-da-arasamthavroboebi-usmenen.html>.

Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House in exile, Vilnius (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Belarusian Association of Journalists
- Belarusian Helsinki Committee
- Human Rights Centre “Viasna”

Human Rights House Belgrade (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Lawyers Committee for Human Rights YUCOM
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

Education Human Rights House Chernihiv (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Chernihiv Public Committee of Human Rights Protection
- Center of Humnistic Tehnologies “AHALAR”
- Center of Public Education “ALMENDA”
- Human Rights Center “Postup”
- Local Non-governmental Youth organizations M’ART
- Transcarpathian Public Center
- Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union

Human Rights House Kiev (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Association of Ukrainian Human Rights Monitors on Law-Enforcement
- Human Rights Information Centre
- Center for Civil Liberties
- Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group
- Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union

Human Rights House Oslo (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Health and Human Rights Info
- Human Rights House Foundation

Human Rights House Voronezh (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Charitable Foundation
- Civic Initiatives Development Centre
- Confederation of Free Labor
- For Ecological and Social Justice
- Free University
- Golos
- Interregional Trade Union of Literary Men
- Lawyers for labor rights
- Memorial
- Ms. Olga Gnezdilova
- Soldiers Mothers of Russia
- Voronezh Journalist Club
- Voronezh-Chernozemie
- Youth Human Rights Movement

Human Rights House Yerevan (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- “Shakhhatun” Women’s Democracy Support
- Democracy Today
- Helsinki Association for Human Rights
- Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Vanadzor

- Insuring Equal Rights
- Journalists' Club "Asparez"
- Public Information and Need of Knowledge (PINK Armenia)
- Real World, Real People
- Women's Resource Center
- "Socioscope" Societal Research & Consultancy Centre
- "The Rule of Law" Human Rights NGO

Human Rights House Zagreb (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- APEO/UPIM Association for Promotion of Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities
- B.a.B.e.
- CMS - Centre for Peace Studies
- Documenta - Centre for Dealing with the Past
- GOLJP - Civic Committee for Human Rights
- Svitanje - Association for Protection and Promotion of Mental Health

The House of the Helsinki Foundation For Human Rights, Warsaw
Public Union of Democracy and Human Rights Resource Centre, Azerbaijan
Vivarta, United Kingdom

Copies to:

- Ucha Nanuashvili, Ombudsman of Georgia
- Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe
- Private Office of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe
- Delegation of the Council of Europe in Azerbaijan
- United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders
- United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly
- Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE ODIHR)
- Cabinet of Commissioner Johannes Hahn for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations
- Delegation of the European Union in Georgia
- Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament
- Diplomatic community in Tbilisi, Brussels, Geneva, New York and Strasbourg
- Various ministries of foreign affairs and parliamentary committees on foreign affairs

About the Human Rights House Network (www.humanrightshouse.org)

The Human Rights House Network (HRHN) unites 90 human rights NGOs joining forces in 18 independent Human Rights Houses in 13 countries in Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, East and Horn of Africa, and Western Europe. HRHN's aim is to protect, empower and support human rights organisations locally and unite them in an international network of Human Rights Houses.

The Human Rights House Tbilisi, founded in September 2009, is a collaborative project, which unites six Georgian human rights organisations: Human Rights Centre, Article 42 of the Constitution, Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, Union "Sapari," Caucasian Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Studies, and Media Institute. In addition, HRH Tbilisi serves as the headquarters of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders.

The Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF), based in Oslo (Norway) with an office in Geneva (Switzerland), is HRHN's secretariat. HRHF is international partner of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders and the Balkan Network of Human Rights Defenders.

HRHF has consultative status with the United Nations and HRHN has participatory status with the Council of Europe.