

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/georgia-questions-raised-by-detention-of-08-07-2011,40622.html>

Europe & ex-USSR - Georgia

“Infiltration”

Questions raised by detention of four photographers on spying charges

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Reporters Without Borders is disturbed by the arrests of four well-known photo-journalists yesterday in Tbilisi on spying charges and calls on the authorities to explain these serious accusations and to provide regular information on the situation of the detainees.

“The authorities obviously have a duty to protect national interests but the current fear of spies in Georgia must not be allowed to fuel a climate of intimidation in the media, and security imperatives must not override democratic principles,” Reporters Without Borders said.

“We urge the counter-espionage and judicial services to conduct a calm and impartial investigation that respects legal procedures and the rights of the defendants. While it is impossible for the time being to take a position on the substance of the charges, we believe that the utmost transparency is needed to dispel suspicions that these arrests were politically motivated.”

A total of five leading photo-journalists were arrested in the early hours of yesterday by the interior ministry’s counter-espionage services: **Irakli Gedenidze**, President Saakashvili’s official photographer; his wife **Natia Gedenidze**, who works for the newspaper *Prime-Time*; **Zurab Kurtsikidze** of the *European Press-Photo Agency (EPA)*; interior ministry photographer **Giorgi Abdaladze**; and **Shah Aivazov** of the *Associated Press*.

Aivazov was released after being questioned as a witness. The other four were jailed on spying charges.

The news of their arrests was broken by their relatives and was confirmed during the day by the interior ministry, which issued a statement saying they were accused of “divulging various kinds of information to the intelligence agencies of a neighbouring country, operating under cover, abusing their positions and endangering Georgia’s interests.”

Abdaladze’s lawyer, Ramaz Chichaladze, said they were charged under article 314 subsection 1 of the criminal code, which punishes “the collection, possession and transmission of documents (...) containing classified information” with 8 to 12 years in prison. Chichaladze was finally able to see his client yesterday after a wait of several hours.

The president’s office said this morning that the arrests of the photographers had nothing to do with their work as journalists, and described the case as “a serious infiltration of our institutions.”

Relatives reported that, when the five photographers were arrested, their homes were searched thoroughly and computers, mobile phones and other professional equipment were seized.

“The seizure of journalistic material is a violation of the principle of the confidentiality of journalists’ sources and, according to European Court of Human Rights rulings, is justified only in very specific circumstances,” Reporters Without Borders added.

The 2008 war with Russia has fuelled a climate of security paranoia in Georgia. The charge of being a “Russian spy” is often used by all sides to discredit rivals and a number of self-proclaimed “patriots” hound independent bloggers online. The influential blogger [Berg man](#) received [death threats](#) in the name of “Georgia’s holy land” on his *LiveJournal* blog after

referring to [the violence used to disperse an opposition demonstration](#) on 25 May.

Georgia is ranked 99th out of 178 countries in the latest Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.
