



# EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

15 March 2012

## **STATEMENT OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE OF THE EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM**

### **PERSECUTION OF A MEMBER OF THE EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM SUREN GAZARIAN AND OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS IN KRASNODAR KRAI SHOULD BE IMMEDIATELY STOPPED**

The Steering Committee of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum expresses its strongest concern about legal and physical harassment of a representative of its member organization Suren Gazarian and other civil society activists in Krasnodar Krai of Russia and demands immediate ending of their persecution and dropping of all charges against them.

Two activists of a founding member organization of EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, “Environmental Watch on North Caucasus”, Suren Gazaryan and Evgeny Vitishko were charged on 7 March by the prosecutor of the city of Tuapse in having committed a crime according to the article 167, part 2, of the Russian Criminal Code, “intentionally causing significant damage to property with hooligan motives”. The activists had painted protest graffiti on a metal fence surrounding a cottage which belongs, as they claim, to the Governor of Krasnodar Krai Alexander Tkachov. Environmentalists insist that the cottage was built in a forest zone next to the Black Sea shore illegally, and have filed many complaints to law enforcement agencies and even President Medvedev about this illegal construction. After the prosecutor’s office replied to President Medvedev’s inquiry that there is no fence, that the public access to the sea shore is not blocked and that no law has been violated, activists decided to express their protest with the use of graffiti. Now Gazarian and Vitishko are facing up to 5 years of imprisonment. Prosecutors claim that damage to the fence amounts to about 3 thousand Euros.

The situation has dramatically aggravated further on March 13, when Suren Gazaryan went with his lawyer Viktor Dutlov to the site of the ill-fated Tkachov's cottage to participate in procedural actions in the framework of the investigation, namely to assess the damage done to the fence. As soon as they arrived at the spot to take photographs of the fence, they were immediately attacked by the guards of the Neva private security company hired to guard Tkachov's property. One of the guards was in possession of a handgun with which he threatened Gazaryan and Dutlov. Both were beaten by the guards, handcuffed, and kept by force in the guards’ checkpoint. Their personal possessions, including a video camera, a photo camera, and phones were seized. The guards called the police which detained Gazarian and Dutlov instead of ending illegal denial of their freedom by the guards. Gazarian and Dutlov had to spend a night in drastic conditions in a prison cell of Tuapse police station.

On March 14, both Gazaryan and Dutlov were sentenced to ten days of administrative arrest by judge Bondarev at Tuapse town court, found guilty in “resisting lawful actions of the police”.

Krasnodar Krai, where Sochi Olympic Games will be held in 2014, has been a region of systematic persecution of civil society activists for more than a decade, along with other serious violations of human rights. Several reports have been published by Russian and international NGOs documenting threats, physical attacks, beating, detention, fabricated criminal cases criminal and other forms of never-ending harassment of activists in Krasnodar Krai. Many human rights defenders and environmental activists have been forced to leave the region out of grounded fear for their lives.

We express our indignation about new wave of persecution of environmental activists in Krasnodar Krai. The prosecutor's office of the region has been notified about the illegal seizure of land for the



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governor's house. Instead of initiating inquiry into the facts of illegal activities, the authorities have chosen to intensify pressure against civil society activists.

We condemn the unlawful arrest of the lawyer while performing his duties as it sets a very dangerous precedent. We demand that Mr. Dutlov be allowed to resume his work on defending his clients.

We demand that Suren Gazarian and his lawyer Viktor Dutlov are immediately released and that charges against Gazarian and Evgeny Vitishko are dropped.

We stand in solidarity with our colleagues and member of the Forum Suren Gazarian and other civil society activists facing harassment and persecution.

We call on the Russian federal authorities to launch inquiry into actions of officials of Krasnodar Krai which have declared a war against civil society in the region and are responsible for the current escalation of the situation.