

North Ossetia: Journalist Fights Conviction

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Prominent reporter claims that criminal charge is an attempt to silence him.

A well-known journalist in the North Caucasus is complaining of political harassment after being found guilty of using false documents to obtain Russian citizenship.

On December 17, a regional court in Vladikavkaz fined Yury Bagrov 15,000 roubles (around 540 US dollars) after finding him guilty. But the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reporter, who is appealing his conviction, says the case against him is legally dubious and politically motivated.

He and his lawyer assert that the charge was designed to silence a journalist who has frequently covered stories that criticise the authorities, and to intimidate the media in general.

The journalist himself told the court that in his long experience, he had never witnessed so many procedural violations as in his own case.

Bagrov has been living in Vladikavkaz since 1992, having moved there from Tbilisi, where his father served in the army.

The charge against him is that in 2003 the reporter used false documents from the Sovetsky regional court in Vladikavkaz to receive Russian citizenship, when he was trying to change his old Soviet passport for a new one. At this point, he was told he was not a citizen of Russia at all.

Bagrov, who is well known as one of only a handful of independent journalists in North Ossetia, also works as a stringer for the Associated Press news agency.

"I wrote about topics which local journalists could not touch, such as corruption in government, the sale of soldiers for hired labour, smuggling in South Ossetia, and the involvement of officers from the FSB [intelligence service] in disappearances in Ingushetia," he said.

"Since they laid criminal charges against me, I cannot carry out my duties."

Bagrov regards himself as a local in North Ossetia. He studied at university there, his mother and wife are residents, and he owns an apartment there. He claims he had no need to falsify any documents in order to receive Russian citizenship.

However, this summer ten FSB officers turned up at his apartment and began a search for false documents, weapons, ammunition and drugs. Bagrov said they confiscated his computer, all his notebooks and tape recordings, his dictophone and cassettes, videocassettes, articles and papers, his wife's personal diary and even scraps of paper with telephone numbers on them. They then searched his car and confiscated his computer and computer disks from his office.

Bagrov was only told what charges he was facing on October 7.

When his case was first heard, other journalists were barred by court officials from entering the court building. Bagrov's Radio Liberty colleague Oleg Kusov was physically ejected from the building when he tried to insist on his rights. The Moscow-based reporter has since filed a lawsuit against the officials who laid hands on him.

The main argument for the prosecution was that the court document Bagrov presented to North Ossetia's passport service was a forgery because it bore the wrong stamp and the signature of the judge was fake.

Bagrov's lawyer Alexander Dzilikhov tried to obtain permission to have an independent handwriting expert check the judge's writing against another document bearing the same man's signature but was forbidden to do so.

"For the first time in my career I am losing a case where I have irrefutable evidence of the innocence of the defendant," complained Dzilikhov.

The North Ossetian authorities have refused to comment on the case while it is still going through the courts.

Bagrov is now in a strange position, having been found guilty of seeking illegally to obtain Russian citizenship, while having no other citizenship.

He is being defended by journalists' organisations and has also won the support of public figures such as Taimuraz Chejemov, a lawyer and former chairman of North Ossetia's central electoral commission, who told IWPR that Bagrov was one of very few journalists to present a non-official standpoint.

"In the last few years, there has been practically no freedom of speech in the republic, and practically all opposition newspapers and television channels are closed," Chejemov said, adding that the authorities regarded any contrary opinions as "a threat to stability".

"In North Ossetia, the authorities understand 'stability' to mean the freedom to be silent and freedom to be obedient," he added.

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