

New Persecutions of Human Rights Defenders in the Transnistrian region

One of the most active defenders of human rights in the Transnistrian region of Moldova, lawyer Stepan Popovschi, has been targeted for intimidation by the security structures of the Transnistrian region. On 7 March 2013, local KGB workers stormed the lawyer's house and started a search that began shortly before a press conference, where Stepan Popovschi was to present abuses of the local Tiraspol administration against farmland owners in the region, was scheduled to start. Stepan Popovschi, his wife and their child were shut in one of the rooms of the apartment and not allowed to get out throughout the raid.

The press conference had been announced a few days earlier. Soon after the the announcement was made public, Stepan Popovschi was warned to drop his stand. The invitation [to the press conference], addressed to representatives of foreign embassies in Moldova, was published and commented as "treason" on a local online portal, and on the region's Social Forum. The reason was Popovschi's use the term „Transnistrian region of Moldova”.

Stepan Popovschi, who is leading a social movement called "Farmers' Union", is the first lawyer from the region to represent cases of human rights violations in Transnistria to the European Court of Human Rights. The lawyer said that he has been repeatedly threatened by the regional administration of Transnistria. Two international organizations have recently asked separatist leaders to stop the intimidation against him.

Before the raid, in an interview for Radio Free Europe, the lawyer explained why his work might displease the authorities

in Tiraspol: "The Transnistrian authorities most likely think we are a threat to them. I had the impression that the regime of Igor Smirnov was wrong, but I no longer have this opinion. I was never subjected to persecution and intimidation during that time. I was able to talk to the people about their rights wherever we wanted, even outdoors. Not until recently did I learn what threats and persecutions are."

Promo-LEX Reaction

Promo-LEX lawyer, Pavel Postică, believes that the event is an act of intimidation of the Popovschi family and of all those who dared to take a stand against the abuses of the Tiraspol leader, Evgheni Sevciuk. "The timing of the KGB intervention was not coincidental. A press conference was scheduled for 11.00 on that day, where the abuses of the Transnistrian leader were to be publicized. Obviously, Mr. Sevciuk did not like it. We hope that the situation of Stepan Popovschi and his family will improve."

Promo-LEX director, Ion Manole, says that the Chisinau authorities also bear responsibility for human rights violations in Transnistria, as they address the matter insufficiently in the 5+2 negotiations. The situation of the Transnistrian residents remains difficult.

International Reactions

Civil Rights Defenders

On the same day, shortly after the raid in his home Stepan Popovschi's home, Civil Rights Defenders, a human rights organization from Stockholm, issued an [appeal](#) to separatist leader Evgheni Sevciuk, in which it expresses concern with the repeated persecutions to which Popovschi, a defender of human rights, was subjected in recent months.

The international organization called Evgheni Sevciuk to ensure that the charges against Stepan Popovschi will be

investigated impartially and to do everything in his power to prevent the lawyer's harassment in the future. Civil Rights Defenders also called on Mr Sevciuk to ensure that all human rights defenders in Transnistria can carry out their work freely without being subjected to repression and restrictions, including judicial harassment.

Front Line Defenders

Front Line Defenders, an International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, also issued a [statement](#) on the incident on 7 March, emphasizing that, at the press conference, which was compromised by Transnistrian militia actions, Stepan Popovschi was to read out a statement by 5678 farmland owners demanding Tiraspol leader Evgheni Sevciuk to withdraw the new farmland law that infringes the rights of small landowners. A second statement was signed by 35 defenders of property rights over land in different villages in Transnistria requesting a meeting with Sevciuk to discuss the continuous violations of land property rights in the region.

Front Line Defenders notes that Stepan Popovschi had been persecuted by the Tiraspol administration in the past for organizing public meetings, and expresses concern that the raid at his home and the judicial persecution against him were brought as a result of the peaceful and legal defense of farmers rights to land in Transnistria.