

Court Sentences Nika Gvaramia to 3 Years and 6 Months in Prison in Rustavi 2 Case

By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Tbilisi City Court Judge Lasha Chkhikvadze has announced the verdict in the case of Nika Gvaramia, Kakha Damenia and Zurab Iashvili in the case of Rustavi 2 on May 16.

Mtavari Arkhi TV director Nika Gvaramia has been sentenced to 3 years and 6 months in prison. Gvaramia was arrested in the courtroom after the trial. The judge reclassified the charges against Gvaramia under Article 220 of the Criminal Code (abuse of power) and found him guilty in two episodes.

As for Damenia, the charges against him were also reclassified under Article 220 of the Criminal Code (abuse of power) and found guilty. Damenia was fined ₾ 50,000.

According to the court decision, Iashvili was acquitted of the charges. The bail against him as well as the seizure of property was lifted.

The Prosecutor's Office indicted Gvaramia, Rustavi 2's former CFO Damenia and Inter Media Plus CEO Iashvili on September 6, 2020 in connection with the case. The investigation accused Gvaramia of embezzling Rustavi 2 property, legalizing illegal income and abusing his official authority. Damenia, the former financial director of Rustavi-2, was accused of illegal embezzlement of the TV station's property rights. As for Iashvili, he was accused of commercial bribery and forgery.

According to Mikheil Sarjveladze, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights, the verdict against Gvaramia should not be considered as political persecution.

"This is not political revenge. The plot and content are known for what we are talking about. The court concluded that this was an unlawful act in the category of an offense. A decision was made by the head of the enterprise, reducing the income of the organization. The Public Defender does not deny this. Was it good or bad for the organization, let's talk about it - what could be the reason for the organization to earn less than more? The Public Defender says that he might insure long-term and short-term risks and can you tell me what risks he insured?" Sarjveladze asked rhetorically.

He says that issue is politically sensitive, because Gvaramia's activities are political in nature, which consequently raises political sensitivities, but it does not mean that in a given situation anyone can speak out against political persecution. "Quite well, it is convincingly explained that there was an offense which the court found to be a crime.

Georgian Dream MP Irakli Zarkua said regardless of party affiliation, he will never be happy to arrest a person, but Gvaramia was sentenced based on specific evidence, when he stole or embezzled 7 million from the company. The court found him guilty and sentenced him for it.

Majority MP Guram Macharashvili recalled the decision of the Strasbourg court in the case of Rustavi 2, which ruled that the Georgian judiciary had made a

correct, fair and objective decision regarding the seizure of the TV station by Nika Gvaramia and his accomplices.

"It has now been established that he and his accomplices had seized the funds and these funds were not included in the budget for the reason that Rustavi 2 did not have the financial means. It turned out that quite a lot of money from the company was misused, illegally in favor of Gvaramia and his accomplices. Therefore, exaggerated political statements and emotions are unfounded," he said adding that "foreign partners and the international court have seen well that, unfortunately, the radical part of the opposition in Georgia and part of the so-called media outlets in Georgia use the shield of democracy as if they are committing illegal acts. According to him it is against the rule of law to commit an offense and you want to escape that responsibility because you are a public servant or the head of the media.

The embassy of US to Georgia has announced that this ruling 'calls into question Georgia's commitment to rule of law, and further demonstrates the fundamental importance of having an independent, impartial judiciary in Georgia. The statement emphasized that this case raised questions from its inception, including about the timing and the charges.

"The disturbing pattern of selective investigations and prosecutions targeting those in opposition to the current government undermines the public's confidence in the police, prosecution, the courts, and the government itself. Particularly at this time, when Georgia has an unprecedented opportunity to advance its Euro-Atlantic integration, even the perception of politicized prosecution is detrimental. It is the United States' firm position that a healthy democracy depends on ensuring judicial independence and protecting media freedom. That is why we have repeatedly called for the government to undertake comprehensive reforms to advance these fundamental democratic principles."

Acting British Ambassador to Georgia released a statement in the court ruling, expressing disappointment at the sentence, "especially in the context of Georgia's significant decline in interna-



tional press freedom rankings issued recently by Reporters Without Borders."

"The UK is a strong defender of media freedoms, which are essential for citizens to be able to exercise their democratic rights, on all sides of political debate."

Local watchdog 'Transparency International - Georgia' wrote that the court executed 'a political order by punishing the head of the critical television'.

"Based on the study of the case materials and observation of the process, we can conclude that the case is politically motivated, with the aim of punishing Nika Gvaramia and disrupting the activities of a critical TV station. The use of a justice system for media censorship and intimidation sends a dangerous message to other critical media outlets as well. However, the verdict is a continuation of the political persecution that has been waged against state opponents for

years."

Statement also read that TIG and Public Defender submitted two opinions of Amicus Curiae to the court which indicated that the allegations were baseless in the case. However, it must be said that this is not the first fact of persecution of Gvaramia who often spoke about attempts of his bribery, intimidation, blackmail and surveillance of family members.

NGO also announced that given the deteriorating media environment and actions against critical media outlets arise a feeling that the recent rhetoric and concrete actions of the ruling party and government are aimed at preventing Georgia from receiving a positive response from the European Union.

The political parties Lelo and United National Movement assessed the ruling as politically motivated.

The News in Brief

PREPARED BY
THE MESSENGER STAFF

Ombudsman on Gvaramia Case: This Will have a Very Negative Impact European Integration Process

Of course, it will have a very negative impact on the state of freedom of expression and media freedom in the country, and in general, Georgia will have a very negative impact on the European integration process ...

We think that the principle of legality is violated when criminal liability is incurred for an action that is not considered a crime at all by Georgian court

practice, European, American or British case law. The position of the president is also important ...

If I were the President of Georgia and knew that it was a historic moment for the country and a decision was made to detain a person, a media manager, where the ombudsman said there were no signs of crime, I would really think about using pardon and I think it would be fair.

Margvelashvili on Gvaramia: A Convincing Step in the Construction of Soviet Georgia

"We have taken another convincing step in terms of building Soviet Georgia. That is, we are building a totalitarian

state from an authoritarian state, and this is not one unexpected, extraordinary step.

Of course, the step is painful, the step speaks for itself, but it is one of the steps in the process of dismantling the democratic state, which began with the seizure of state institutions and naturally, logically continues with the dismantling and enslavement of the media because in a totalitarian state not only the state but also the media. Finally, the whole society must behave like the ruler of a totalitarian state.

We have taken another convincing step on this path today," says Former President Giorgi Margvelashvili.

Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.9769; Euro - 3.1028; GBP - 3.6467; 100 Russian Ruble - 4.6696; Swiss Franc - 2.9627

Italian Innovation and Research Day 2022 Celebrated in Georgia

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

On May 16, an award ceremony for the Best Georgian Innovators 'STEM Study Visit to Italy' was held within the framework of the 'Operation Agreement' between the Italian Foundation for Innovation (Cotec) and the Agency for Innovation and Technology of Georgia (GITA).

According to the Embassy of Italy, the agreement, which was concluded in 2018 and later renewed, aims at deepening ties between Italy and Georgia in the scientific-technological field. The event was hosted by the President of GITA, Avtandil Kasradze, and co-introduced by the Ambassador of Italy in Georgia, Enrico Valvo, and the Deputy Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, Irakli Nadareishvili.

Within the framework of the initiative, the winner Georgian innovators will enjoy a three-month study visit to Italy at SPICI srl – Company for Innovation, Cooperation, and Internationalization. SPICI is an innovative and renowned digital academy of the Polo Technology of the University of Naples 'Federico II', located in San Giovanni a Teduccio (Naples) and operating as an international accelerator and center for entrepreneurship. The study visit is financed by Cotec and co-sponsored by GITA.

The initiative aims to enrich the young Georgian innovators with experience in the field of scientific and technical research and to support the implementation of joint projects aimed at strengthening and expanding cooperation between Italy and Georgia. The innovators will be able to develop digital transformation solutions for enterprises and public administrations and also to design and support entrepreneurial development, inter-governmental programs for scientific cooperation, technology transfer, and internationalization for startups.

The winners of the 'Stem Study Visit to Italy' 2022 edition were announced by Ambassador Enrico Valvo: Davit Danelia, specializing in computer engineering, and Mariam Maisuradze, oriented in program management and gender-inclusive innovation.

The ambassador addressed the attendees with a speech and highlighted that thanks to the partnership between the Georgian and Italian sides, it was made possible to organize the first in-person meeting after the covid-19 pandemic.

Ambassador stressed that the quality of applications was very high this year, proving 'the amazing potentialities of Georgian younger generations,' as well as "their genuine love for Italy and the desire to strengthen people-to-people connections."

"Through offering an immersive experience in an Italian innovation hub, with an individual training program and

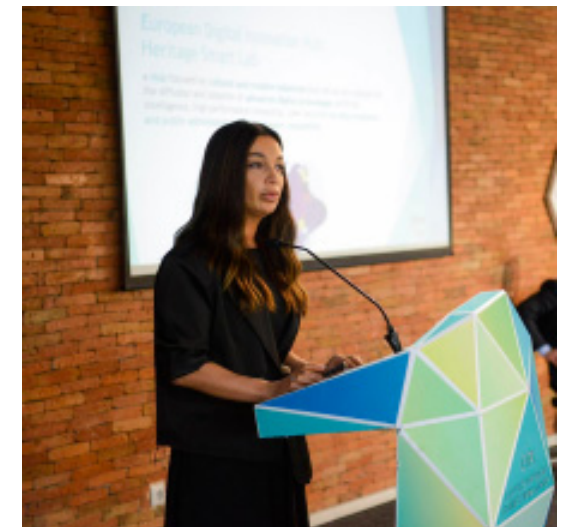
a step-by-step assessment of lessons learnt and further opportunities, it [program] represents quite a unique opportunity at the educational and professional level," Ambassador of Italy in Georgia remarked.

A delegation representing the overall community of innovators from southern Italy took part in the event. Among them, the Assessor for Research, Innovation, and Startup of the Campania Region, Valeria Fascione, Professor Giorgio Ventre from the University of Naples 'Federico II', the CEO of SPICI, Mr. Vincenzo Lipardi, and other representatives of Italian innovation poles and startup accelerators.

The President of COTEC, Professor Nicolais also provided his address remotely. The ceremony was also attended by Dr. Angelo Giuliana - general director of Meditech, Dr. Cristina Angelillo - CEO of InnovUp, Professor Gaga Shurguaia from the University L'Orientale of Naples, and Dr. Nino Enukidze - Rector of the

Business and Technology University.

According to the Italian Embassy in Georgia, after the award ceremony, the participating innovation hubs presented their respective strengths and strategies for technological development, in the context of an interactive session between innovators.



Weather

Tuesday, May 17

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 23°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: 11°C

Wednesday, May 18

Day Clear

High: 25°C

Night Clear

Low: 13°C

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On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Hungary and Georgia, H.E. Anna Maria Siko, Ambassador of Hungary and Mr. Robert Christopher Summerfield held a cocktail reception on May 16.



H.E. Anna Maria Siko







