

1 February 2016

Statement
by the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
on the Deteriorating Human Rights Situation in Armenia

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is concerned about the increasing number of human rights violations of civil and political activists by Armenian authorities. Since the beginning of 2016, Armenian authorities have tightened repression against political opponents and by arresting one more activist increased the number of political prisoners to 13.

On the night of 31 December, the representative of the socio-political association “New Armenia” Gevorg Safaryan was arrested while protecting another citizen who was a victim of police aggression only for wearing a Christmas tree costume (the incident was covered by Radio "Liberty" and is available [here](#)).

The situation is exacerbated by the use by authorities of blatant instruments of pressure against political prisoners who are currently in jail. The life and health of political prisoners Gevorg Safaryan and Hayk Kyureghyan is threatened by imprisoned criminals, these threats forced them (and other political prisoners in solidarity with them) to reach for such extreme measures as the hunger strike.

Attacks and threats against young oppositionists, civic activists and human rights defenders have also become more frequent. The representatives of “New Armenia” Suzy Gevorgyan and Hovhannes Harutyunyan, as well as blogger Karen Harutyunyan were assaulted. The human rights defender Zaruhi Hovhannisyanyan became the target of threats from the unknown through Facebook. The attackers still have not been identified by the law enforcement agencies.

On the night of 26 January, the police also forcibly dismantled the tent on the Freedom Square where the “New Armenia” were conducting the round-the-clock vigil against the results of constitutional referendum.

On the one hand, these events are happening against the backdrop of the negotiations on a new cooperation agreement between the EU and Armenia that started on 7 December 2015. On the other hand, they are accompanied by direct public threats from senior politicians representing the ruling Republican Party against their political opponents to “cut off their head”, “rape them”, “poke their eyes out”. These persons have not suffered any, even administrative, penalty.

We also find the sudden resignation of the Armenian Ombudsman Karen Andreyan on 12 January to be puzzling. He submitted his letter of resignation just in a few hours after sending the official request to the Armenian prefect of police to clarify the legitimacy of the use of force by police against citizens on the New Year's Eve on Freedom Square within five days. This suggests that there is a direct link between the resignation of the Ombudsman and his human rights activities.

In connection with the arrest of Gevorg Safaryan the international human rights organization Human Rights Watch has addressed a [letter](#) to the Prosecutor General of Armenia with an appeal to revoke the two-month pre-trial detention of Gevorg Safaryan. The Human Rights Watch demanded to conduct a special investigation into the legality of the police actions against people who tried to install a small Christmas tree and were wearing clothes resembling the Christmas tree on the New Year's Eve.

The Steering Committee of the Civil Society Forum calls on the Armenian authorities to immediately release Gevorg Safaryan and the remaining 12 political prisoners and stop the persecution of the opposition, as well as the violation of fundamental political and civil rights and freedoms.