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Armenia: Judicial prosecution of human rights defender Sashik Sultanyan

On 20 May 2021, officers of the Investigation Department of the National Security Service of the Republic of Armenia searched the home of human rights defender **Sashik Sultanyan**, houses of his colleagues and an office of the **Yezidi Centre for Human Rights** as part of a criminal investigation for “actions aimed at the incitement of national, racial or religious hatred, at racial superiority or humiliation of national dignity” (Part 1 and Part 2 of Art. 226 of the Criminal Code). Over the past year, Sashik Sultanyan has been facing ongoing judicial prosecution and has had his passport confiscated by the officers of the Investigation Department.

[Sashik Sultanyan](#) is a prominent human rights defender and head of the Yezidi Centre for Human Rights in Armenia. The human rights defender has been actively advocating for the rights of the Yezidi community in Armenia and at the international level. The [Yezidi Centre for Human Rights](#) (YCHR) is a group of Yezidi human rights defenders who are implementing projects to preserve the identity, language and culture of national minorities and also promote the participation of the Yezidi community in the social-political and economic life of the country. The organization’s goal is to protect the rights of the Yezidis and other ethnoreligious minorities based on the fundamental principles of human rights.

On 20 May 2021, officers of the Investigation Department of the National Security Service of the Republic of Armenia obtained a warrant and searched the home of human rights defender Sashik Sultanyan and an office of the Yezidi Centre for Human Rights in Yerevan as part of a criminal investigation for “actions aimed at the incitement of national, racial or religious hatred, at racial superiority or humiliation of national dignity” (Part 1 and Part 2 of Art. 226 of the Criminal Code). During the searches laptops, computers, flash drives, documents and notebooks were confiscated. Sashik Sultanyan was prohibited from using his phone and recording what happened during the search. On the same day, similar searches were conducted in the apartments and vehicles of Yezidi Centre for Human Rights news editor and human rights defender Muraz Shamoyan and volunteer of the organisation Amo Sadoyev. On 21 May, Muraz Shamoyan, Amo Sadoyev and Sashik Sultanyan were all summoned to the Investigation Department office for questioning. Muraz Shamoyan was interrogated for eight consecutive hours without a break, during which an investigator reportedly said that “Western NGOs must be closed down.”

On 3 October 2020, the investigator of the Investigation Department of the National Security Service L. Tatoyan initiated a criminal case against Sashik Sultanyan, based on a conversation that the human rights defender had on 8 June 2020 with Iraq-based Yezidi news medium www.yazidinews.com which he believed to be off the record. In the recorded conversation, the

human rights defender had presented his views on the state of the protection of the rights of Yezidi citizens in the Republic of Armenia. The human rights defender's comments were deemed by the Investigation Department of the National Security Service as "actions aimed at the incitement of national, racial or religious hatred, at racial superiority or humiliation of national dignity". The criminal case had been opened on the basis of a complaint about the recorded conversation sent to the Investigation Department of the National Security Service by the leader of the far-right "Veto" movement, Narek Malyan. The Veto movement, which describes itself online as a social-political anti-Soros movement in Armenia, has actively sought to vilify human rights organisations in the country.

Sashik Sultanyan has a long history of being targeted for his peaceful human rights work. In July 2020, a smear campaign against the human rights defender was launched on Armenian social media by unknown individuals through posts on Facebook. At the end of November 2020 Sashik Sultanyan learned that a criminal investigation had been launched against him on 3 October 2020 and that he did not have the right to receive a copy of the reason for initiating the criminal case. On 20 May 2021, Sashik Sultanyan's passport was confiscated during the search of his home by the officers of the Investigation Department preventing him from leaving the country. Sashik Sultanyan's colleagues have been assigned a witness status in the investigation and have been prohibited from contacting the human rights defender. The work of the Yezidi Centre for Human Rights has now stopped due to all of its technical equipment being confiscated in the search on 20 May 2021.

Front Line Defenders condemns the judicial prosecution and ongoing smear campaign of Sashik Sultanyan and believes that he is being targeted solely as a result of his work in promoting and protecting ethnic minority rights in Armenia. Front Line Defenders condemns the intimidation and targeting of the human rights defender, which may have a chilling effect on civil society, and is not conducive to the creation of a safe and enabling environment in which human rights defenders can carry out their work in Armenia.

Front Line Defenders calls on the Armenian authorities:

1. Immediately and unconditionally drop the charges against Sashik Sultanyan and cease the judicial prosecution and harassment against him, as it is believed they are solely motivated by his legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Sashik Sultanyan;
3. Cease and strongly condemn the ongoing smear campaign against human rights defender Sashik Sultanyan conducted through Armenian social media;

4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Armenia are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

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