

Statement on the case of Evgeny Vitishko at the OSCE HDIM session on independence of prosecutors and judges

Warsaw, 24 September 2015

Delivered by Yuri Dzhibladze on behalf of the Civic Solidarity Platform and the Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights

I would like to speak on the situation of Evgeny Vitishko, a Russian environmental, anti-corruption and human rights activist and a member of the Russian nongovernmental organization, Environmental Watch on the North Caucasus. His case is an example of how the justice system has been used to harass and prosecute civic activists for their legitimate and peaceful work.

Evgeny Vitishko has been recognized by Russian NGOs as political prisoner and by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience.

Vitishko has been wrongfully held in prison in Tambov Oblast since February 2014. He has served half of a three year sentence. In 2013, Evgeny Vitishko and his colleague in Environmental Watch Suren Gazaryan were arrested and convicted of allegedly writing graffiti on a fence in the protected forests along the Black Sea. The fence allegedly marked the territory of then governor Tkachev's (Tkachev is now Minister of Agriculture of the Russian Federation) summer home that was built on environmentally protected territory, in blatant violation of the Russian law. In a surreal twist, after the arrest, the local authorities announced that the fence did not exist – to cover up corruption and violation of the law. However, the court did not use this document by the authorities in its proceedings.

The two activists were given three-year suspended prison sentences. In the lead up to the Sochi Olympics in February 2014, the two activists were informed they would serve time after all, for alleged violations of the conditions of their suspended sentence, which they denied. Suren Gazaryan fled the country and received political asylum in Europe, where he now lives and works as a biologist.

Evgeny Vitishko was held in a pre-trial detention center for 15 days in February 2014, and then was held in an unknown prison facility for days before being transferred to the Tambov prison colony where he now is serving his sentence. During that time his lawyer and family had no idea of his whereabouts.

Vitishko has now served one year and six months of his sentence, and on September 29' his case is up for appeal. We urge the judge in this case to release Evgeny Vitishko, who has been unjustly imprisoned following an unfair trial, based on trumped up charges that were clearly designed to stop him and his colleagues at Environmental Watch on the North Caucasus from engaging in their environmental work.

We also call on the Russian authorities to stop their practice of putting pressure on environmental, anti-corruption and human rights activists, who peacefully engage in their legitimate activity.