

STATEMENT

by international observers representing the Civic Solidarity Platform at the trial of suspects in the murder of Vitali Safarov

Tbilisi, Georgia, 26 June 2019

On June 26, 2019 the trial of two men accused of murdering Georgian human rights defender Vitali Safarov was held in Tbilisi City Court. The observers representing the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP), Alexandra Novitchkova (Public Alternative Foundation, Ukraine) and Svitlana Valko (Truth Hounds, Ukraine) did not monitor this court hearing in person as an expression of solidarity with the family members and friends of Vitali Safarov, who boycotted the hearing due to the inappropriate behavior of the defense lawyers.

The defense lawyers made their closing statements and the defendants have had their final word.

The family, friends, and acquaintances of the murdered Safarov decided to boycott this court hearing as a protest against the unethical behavior of the defense lawyers Archil Shabashvili, Levan Buadze, Malkhaz Salakaia, and, especially, Zurab Begiashvili during the trial. The judge, Shorena Guntsadze, repeatedly reprimanded the defense lawyers about the inadmissibility of pressure upon the witnesses and about their choice of vocabulary while questioning the witnesses. In addition, the monitors noticed that defense lawyers repeatedly asked the witnesses unethical questions and made inappropriate comments about their intellectual abilities and appearance, and about the ethnic origin and religion of the victim, his family, and witnesses. In this regard we would like to remind the reader that in their June 17 statement, the monitors expressed serious concern about the systematic violation of professional ethics by the defense lawyer Zurab Begiashvili.

The volunteer interpreters, who had translated what was going on in the court room for the monitors during all previous hearings, also decided to join the boycott. Taking into account the decision of the family and friends of Vitali Safarov and the volunteer interpreters, the international monitors decided it was appropriate not to monitor the hearing on June 26th and this way to support the boycott and express their solidarity with the position of its initiators.

The international monitors support the decision of the family, friends, and acquaintances of the murdered Vitali Safarov and those who demonstrated their support and expressed their expectations that this boycott will make the defense lawyers think about professional ethics

standards with regard to their behavior during the hearings.

We would like to remind the reader that is the first case in Georgian history in which a group murder was charged as a hate crime. As a result, the trial has received significant media and public attention. Given the historic nature of this trial, the representatives of the Civic Solidarity Platform, as well as other NGOs from Georgia and abroad, emphasize that a fair judicial process in this trial is necessary to form the basis for future prevention and judicial protection from hate crimes and from the violent activities of far-right extremist groups.

The two defendants are 23-year-old Giorgi Sokhadze and 20-year-old Avtandil Kandelakishvili. Sokhadze and Kandelakishvili, who are allegedly affiliated with a neo-Nazi group, have been charged with the crime of premeditated group murder on the basis of racial, religious, national, and ethnic hate, under Article 109.2.d.e of the Georgian Criminal Code. The prosecutor demanded the close to maximum term of imprisonment. If convicted, the defendants face a sentence of 13 to 17 years in prison. The defendants pleaded not guilty.

The sentence will be declared on the 27th of June. The Civic Solidarity Platform will continue monitoring this case.

The Civic Solidarity Platform is a network of independent civic groups from across the OSCE region, bringing together non-governmental organizations, activists and experts committed to improving the situation with human rights, rule of law, and democratic institutions in Europe, Eurasia and North America. Its aim is to serve as a conduit through which civic activists can build alliances, strengthen mutual support and solidarity, and improve their influence on national and international human rights policy. For more information, please visit <http://civicsolidarity.org>