

New Court Hearing for Calestru and Savencov in Chisinau, Moldova

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Family members wait for hours outside the prison in Moldova to bring food to their loved ones behind bars. Their wives hope that their pre-trial detention will not be extended again and they will be released

Chișinău/Moldova (HRWF) – On January 26, 2016 there will be a new court hearing about whether or not the pre-trial detention of Mihai Calestru and Oleg Savencov will be extended. The two men are members of the Unification Church who were arrested on false charges (human trafficking) on 30th October 2015.

Yesterday, the wives of the prisoners went to the prison to bring them food. They told HRWF that, “their daily menu is porridge in the morning and in the evening. For lunch they just get clear soup (almost water) and it has a bad taste. That is why relatives of the prisoners have to feed them. We are only allowed to pass food once a week. People bring 25-30 kg per week in average. The procedure is burdensome. First we must submit a request in three copies in which we must list the content of the bag. Then we have to wait for our turn until we are called. It means usually 3 to 6 hours waiting outside whatever the weather and for the moment it is -15°C. Once people submit their request, they cannot leave because they must also give their identity card.” (See picture above)

On Tuesday, representatives of Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l (HRWF) and Forum on Religious Freedom/ Europe (FOREF) held a press conference in Chisinau and asked Oleg Savencov and Mihai Calestru to be “immediately and unconditionally released.” A representative of the local branch of Amnesty International, who was also a former prosecutor in Moldova, commented on the case during the press conference and confirmed that it was unfounded.

The Prosecutor’s allegation against the two men is deeply flawed. It claims that they established the Unification Church in Moldova in 2008 as an “organized criminal group.” One of the defendants, Oleg Savencov, is a Ukrainian citizen who entered Moldova only in 2014. Mihai Calestru was never a Church leader. “Moldova’s anti-trafficking legislation was not meant to be instrumentalized against peaceful religious organizations,” said Dr Aaron Rhodes, President of the Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe. If convicted of trafficking under Article 165, Oleg Savencov and Mihai Calestru face jail terms of 6 to 12 years.

Last year, the movement of Falun Gong was banned by a court on the basis of a law against extremism that is now reviewed by the Constitutional Court of Moldova.