

The Natalia Project

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The Civil Rights Defenders organization has introduced a wireless assault system that protects human rights activists who are at risk.



Back in 2009, human rights activist, Natalia Estemirova, was found murdered as she was working on “extremely sensitive” cases of human rights abuses in Chechnya during armed conflicts in the republic and the North Caucasus region.

Before her death, Estemirova documented and reported on human rights violations; such as forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture. “Unfortunately, [her] murder is not the only example of how human rights defenders in Russia are being silenced,” says Peter Öholm, Program Officer of the Civil Rights Defenders – an independent expert organization in Stockholm that aims to defend people’s civil and political rights.

After Estemirova’s death, the Civil Rights Defenders wondered what they could do as an organization to protect human rights activists at risk. Assaults were taking place without anyone knowing about them, making it impossible to protect and help the victims. There was a need to enable victims to send out distress signals when they were attacked.

Civil Rights Defenders launched the Natalia Project in the spring of 2013, which is a wireless assault alarm system for human rights defenders. “We decided to name

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the project after Natalia Estemirova since she symbolizes the important and courageous work that many human rights defenders in the North Caucasus region continue to do,” explains Öholm.

Observe, React, Engage

The Natalia Project is based off of three principles: observe, react, and engage. Those who sign up for the Natalia Project receive notifications of distress signals sent by human rights defenders wearing a bracelet via their social networks. When an alarm is triggered it alerts local partners and the headquarters of the Civil Rights Defenders, providing the exact time and location of the assault.

Volunteers are able to get involved and react once the signal reaches their social networks. Depending on the situation, different suggestions for taking action will be presented by the Civil Rights Defenders. What makes the Natalia Project unique is it enables the distress signal to reach everyone simultaneously, increasing the chance to save lives.

A Lifeline Bracelet



The Natalia bracelet is made from polycarbonate, rubber, and steel. It has to be made durable in order to survive the violence and brutality of an assault. Its purpose is to serve as a lifeline for the human rights activists that wear it. Distress signals are sent from the bracelet via Global System for Communications (GSM) and Global Positioning System (GPS) chip + antennas. “GSM is used for communicating alarms

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and positions using Short Message Service (SMS) and data via General Packet Radio Service (GPRS)," says Öholm. "GSM triangulation [is used] as a back-up when GPS does not work?"

The bracelet also contains an alarm trigger sensor and a patented alarm activation and locking mechanism. The sensor activates the alarm if the bracelet is removed by force. A human rights defender can also trigger an alarm manually, which causes the bracelet to lock itself on their arm.

Once a distress signal is activated, a signal is sent via GPRS to the servers in Stockholm, where Civil Rights Defenders verify the alarm, and then decide what information should be shared and posted on different platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. "The verification of an alarm is crucial from a security perspective," says Öholm. "The police will not be notified by default since in many cases, the most serious threats towards human rights activists, comes from the government agencies and law enforcement."

Protocols & Specifications

Due to the different environments and characteristics of each situation that activists are involved in, each bracelet comes equipped with an individual protocol for security.

"Each bearer of the alarm is unique in the sense that they all work in different environments and the possible threats look different," explains Öholm. "In some cases, the most appropriate action might be to call the local chief of police, but in other cases this could be counter-productive. Our task is to try to determine as many possible scenarios and relevant factors for each bearer in advance, and prepare actions accordingly."

GSM was chosen to help keep the bracelet activated in any location at any time. However, without mobile coverage the bracelet won't work.

A Worldwide Connection

The Natalia Project helps create a worldwide connection by integrating a mobile app, PFO Shield, which can be downloaded for free on iTunes and Google Play. "Together with our technology partner, PFO Technologies, we are developing a new version of the app that will be released this year. The new app will enable more functionality for our users in the field," says Öholm.

Anyone interested in the Natalia Project can sign up and participate in the message exchanges, but Öholm emphasizes how the Civil Rights Defenders would like all people signing up to be willing to take action if an alarm is triggered by signing petitions, sending emails, and sharing information about the human rights defender who is under attack.

"If attackers know that people around the world are following human rights activists, the likeliness of them attacking will decrease. Even though the project is

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not a complete security solution or guarantee for any human rights defender, it is a very important complement for many situations where it will increase the security and safety," says Öholm.

The knowledge that the world could know about such incidents is very powerful and it will contribute to a reduced level of threats. The Natalia Project will also contribute to an increased knowledge on some of the regions and countries where human rights activists work, and shed some light on the serious violations that occur within them.

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