

2 Ukrainian journalists kidnapped in Crimea, media watchdog

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USPA News - Two Ukrainian journalists have gone missing in Crimea, which is under control of pro-Russian troops, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said on Monday, warning that escalating violations of the rights of journalists would turn Crimea into a "lawless region." Reporters Without Borders said that Olena Maksymenko, who works for the Ukrainian weekly Ukrainskyi Tyzhden, disappeared on Sunday alongside Kateryna Butko and Aleksandra Ryazantseva, two activists in the Auto-Maidan movement that supports the new government in Kiev. The three women were stopped at a checkpoint in Perekop at around 4 p.m. local time on Sunday when a soldier without insignia spotted a pro-Maidan tattoo on one of the women's hands.

The soldiers proceeded to search the car and discovered Ukrainian national symbols, letters and cameras, which they disposed of. Oleksiy Byk, a Glavkom journalist and resident of Crimea, was likely the last person to have seen the women. Byk told Reporters Without Borders that the last time he saw the three women, they were knelt next to a military tent with their hands bound. Shortly afterward, Byk witnessed them being taken to an unknown location. Byk was arrested a little while later at the same checkpoint in Perekop, which connects the Crimean peninsula to the Ukrainian mainland, after soldiers without insignia discovered cameras inside of the car he was in. He was arrested along with his driver Yevhen Rakhno and freelance photographer Oles Kromplyas. Byk was released after his brother proved that he is a Crimean resident but his companions, Kromplyas and Rakhno, remained missing on Monday. "We are alarmed by the steady escalation in violations of journalists' rights in Crimea, which is turning into a lawless region controlled by armed bands whose anonymity reinforces the impunity," RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said. "The frequency of deliberate attacks on journalists and the scale of the censorship suggest a desire to turn the region into a black hole for news and information." Analogue over-the-air transmission of all Ukrainian TV stations, except science channel Tonis, was suspended in the Crimean region on Sunday and their frequencies were re-assigned to Russian national television stations. On Monday, transmission via digital frequency was also terminated. Various concerned parties have spoken out against Sunday's 'kidnapping' and against the violation of the rights of journalists in Crimea. Deloire, speaking directly to those responsible for taking the two Ukrainian journalists, demanded their safe return. "The forces controlling the Crimea are responsible for the fate of these journalists," he said. "We demand that they provide immediate information about their location and state of health, and that they release them without delay." The European security bloc, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), also called for the immediate release of the missing journalists. "I am extremely worried about the escalation of attacks against journalists in Crimea," said Dunja Mijatovic, the Representative on Freedom of the Media for the OSCE. "The responsibility for ensuring journalists' safety lies with those responsible for law and order in Crimea, and they must immediately release these journalists," Mijatovic added. On Friday, in an interview with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Ukrainian human rights activist Maryna Tsapok said journalists in the region are being 'scared off.' "We can say for sure that the right to expression is being violated in Crimea. All independent journalists are facing pressure. The main TV channels have been blocked and replaced by Russian channels," Tsapok said. "Journalists reporting on anti-Russian protests are being scared off by self-defense groups and there are violations of the freedom of assembly."

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