

'Crazy Abkhaz' Journalists Cover Syria Frontline

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In this video still, a T-72 tank operated by Syrian state forces stands by after a grenade hits a nearby vehicle.

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This footage from a camera mounted on the turret of a Russian-made T-72 Syrian tank gives the viewer the sensation of playing a video game, but at about 1:12 in the video, any illusion of it being a video game is broken when a nearby vehicle is obliterated by a rocket-propelled grenade.

When a 57-year-old arbitration court judge from the Belgorod region was injured in Syria

earlier this year, having been shot in the arm and face, observers asked the obvious question: What was he doing there?

It explained little that he said he was working as a volunteer for an obscure news group: the Abkhazian Network News Agency, or ANNA.

The online agency with a staff of about 50 people publishes half a dozen daily reports on the conflict in Syria, including graphic videos of fighting on the frontline that have gathered a total of almost 2.5 million views on YouTube, but few people have heard of it or know its mission.

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Indeed, why would an organization in Christian-dominated Abkhazia, a tiny breakaway region of Georgia, send a crew of reporters to cover the ruthless fight between a rebel army and the government forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad?

The agency, which has a forceful pro-Assad slant, was founded and is led by Marat Musin, a specialist in financial intelligence who lectures at the prestigious Moscow State University and teaches at the Russian State University of Trade and Economics.

Musin told The Moscow Times that ANNA's aim is to "counter the advanced information technologies that are used by al-Qaida to make insurgents in the Middle East look like freedom fighters."

"Just like Syria, Russia is a resource-rich and geopolitically pivotal country. Once they take on Syria this will spread further to the Caucasus and then to Russia proper," he said. "I don't want to run around my country with a rifle."

The agency has caught the attention of international news organizations with unusual reports such as footage from a camera mounted on the turret of a Russian-made T-72 Syrian tank, giving the viewer the sensation of playing a video game.

But the violence is real, as becomes clear in the video when a nearby vehicle is obliterated by a rocket-propelled grenade.

Russia has been a key player in international efforts to put a stop to the violence in Syria, where the almost two-year-old conflict between Sunni-dominated rebels and Assad's predominantly Shiite forces has seen more than 70,000 people killed, according to UN estimates.

Moscow has supported longtime ally Assad, delivering arms to his regime and blocking UN

resolutions that would put pressure on his government to cease fighting. Russian authorities have also expressed fears that the rebel forces are dominated by Islamist militants like those whom Russia has fought for decades in the North Caucasus.

On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov traveled to Britain to hold talks focusing on Syria with his British counterpart, William Hague. Britain, the United States and other countries including Saudi Arabia and Turkey have said Assad must step down to help end the conflict, pointing to evidence that his government has murdered civilians.

Musin, who says ANNA does not receive funding or support from the Russian government, argues that Moscow's backing of Assad does not go far enough and that the forces fighting his government could spark a third world war.

He started the agency in July 2011 after traveling to Libya on what he called an "academic mission." He said that he became concerned there with what he perceived as a trend in the Arab Spring revolutions to be led by Islamist extremists and that the conflicts could spread as far as Russia's borders.

"We stand on the precipice of fascism," he said, ominously.

The agency's pro-Assad stance has helped give it unparalleled access to Syrian government forces in the country's many conflict zones, especially in the suburbs around Damascus, where they do a lot of their shooting.

ANNA has a permanent bureau in the Syrian capital, which Musin said spends most of its time "obtaining permissions from the government bureaucracy to give them access to the frontline." The agency has two to three people who work in Syria permanently and send materials on a daily basis.

Musin said the ANNA volunteers, most of whom are Russian, have become known in Syria as the "crazy Abkhaz" for their sometimes daredevil coverage.

Musin, an Abkhaz citizen, said that the Abkhaz government does not provide the organization any support and that he registered it there to "raise the country's profile and to get it recognized by Libya and Syria."

A spokesman for the breakaway region's Justice Ministry confirmed by phone that the news agency was registered in Abkhazia by an "Abkhaz citizen" but that it does not operate in the region.

Vasily Pavlov, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Russian army who had just returned to Russia from a month-long stint as an ANNA correspondent in Syria, said Wednesday that the volunteer journalists spend as many as 10 hours a day shooting video in the urban battlefields.

He said that the Syrian government army provides them security and helps them arrange where to shoot but that army officials like journalists "less than a little." He said he has developed a rapport with them, however, partly due to his own military background.

Pavlov said he joined ANNA initially just to get a sense of the situation on the ground. Over

time, he said, he became convinced that the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main armed rebel group fighting Assad, was led by militant Islamists who were "absolutely nuts" and realized that it was "our [Russian] war."

The FSA has secular leaders, according to news reports, but there are also Islamists fighting Assad.

It remains unclear whether the Russian government is aware of ANNA's existence, although it has taken notice of some of the agency's exploits.

After the Belgorod judge, Sergei Berezhnoi, was injured in January, the Foreign Ministry denied that he was part of a covert Russian operation, describing him as a "volunteer" who had gone to Syria on his own initiative.

In June, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov praised Musin for his work in covering a massacre in the Syrian city of Houla, the blame for which is under dispute.

Vyacheslav Nikonov, deputy head of the State Duma's International Affairs Committee, said he hadn't heard of ANNA but didn't find it odd that a group of Russian volunteers would want to cover frontline warfare in Syria.

"Why not?" he said. "The situation in Syria is quite clear: The government is fighting al-Qaida militants. Why wouldn't Russian volunteers cover it?"

Musin said the agency is funded by donations from Russian businessmen who support the cause of fighting al-Qaida, which has claimed responsibility for attacks on Syrian government troops.

Pavlov said the volunteers had their transportation paid for, including regular flights to and from Moscow and Damascus, as well as food. He said they do not receive salaries.

Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the Moscow-based Middle East Institute, said he doubted that ANNA could be fully independent.

He said that the "most obvious connection" would be to the Russian government but that Moscow would not spend "a single ruble" on pro-Assad propaganda.

Satanovsky suggested that another Middle Eastern ally of Syria could be backing Musin's agency instead.

"If I were the director of the FSB [Russian Federal Security Service], I would check to see whether Musin is connected with the Iranians," he said.

Iran, where Shiite Islam is the dominant religion, has supported the Assad regime along with Russia.

When asked about the suggested link, Musin did not explicitly confirm or deny it, saying: "I've met the Iranian ambassador in Moscow, but we only cover Syria and have nothing to do with Iran."

Musin describes ANNA's work in grave terms, warning that the agency is helping inform the world about a conflict that could engulf all of Europe.

"We are the only ones who make a true assessment of what is going on in Syria. If Russia and Europe will not open their eyes to this, they will both face dire consequences," Musin said.

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