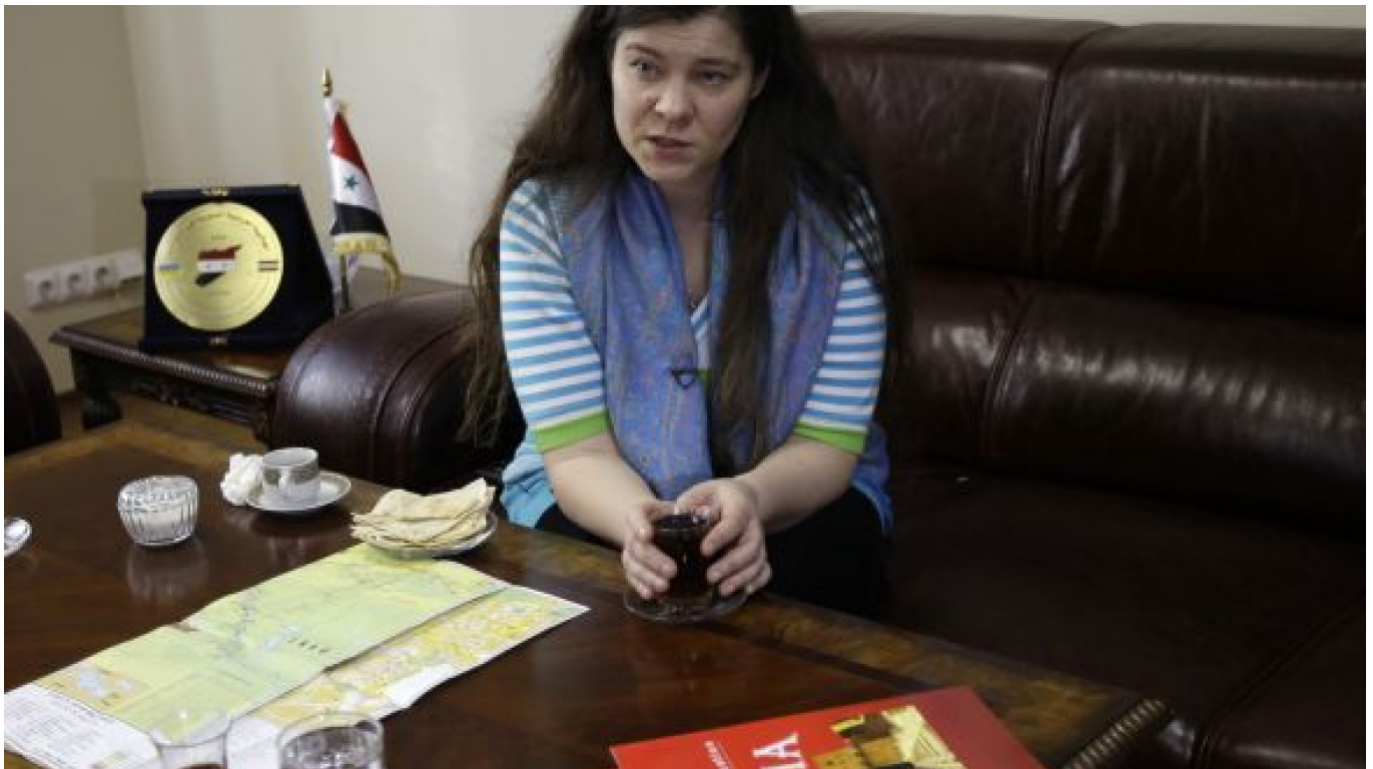


Ukrainian Recounts Ordeal in Syrian Captivity

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Kochneva speaking during an interview at the Syrian Embassy in Kiev. She said she plans to return to Syria. **Sergei Chuzavkov**

KIEV — A Ukrainian journalist has returned home from Syria after escaping captors who held her for more than 150 days, and she recounted her ordeal in an interview staunchly defending the government of President Bashar Assad and promising to return to Syria to "defend the truth."

Ankhar Kochneva, 40, who has worked in Syria as a travel agent, translator, journalist and blogger for several years, returned to Kiev on Sunday after she walked free last week.

Kochneva was kidnapped in western Syria on Oct. 9 and reportedly held by members of the Free Syrian Army opposition group. In a video statement, her captors accused her of cooperating with Russian security services and threatened to execute her unless ransom was paid. None of the rebel brigades officially claimed responsibility for holding

the journalist.

Kochneva said she was kidnapped outside the city of Homs when she was riding in a taxi on the way to Damascus. She said she had been at a beach and had her swimsuit with her.

The journalist said she was held in a small room in a six-room house, which was permanently cold because the windows were broken. Kochneva said her meals consisted of a piece of flatbread and half of a tomato, which caused her to lose a lot of weight and brought on other health problems. Her captors insulted, threatened and psychologically abused her, for instance throwing a washbasin into a wall near where she was standing, she said.

"This is their freedom and democracy: They kidnap and kill people," Kochneva said Monday at the Syrian Embassy in Kiev, looking pale, but otherwise lively and calm.

Kochneva denied the rebels' accusations that she was a spy, saying she was a well-known travel agent and editorial assistant working with Russian, Ukrainian and Western media outlets in Syria.

"They understood very well who I was, but they tried to blow up this soap bubble: What if we start lying that she is so important, perhaps somebody will give us something," she said.

Kochneva said she decided to try to escape after she realized that negotiations on freeing her had reached a dead end and her captors were getting impatient.

"When it became clear that I had no chance, I decided that it was time to leave," Kochneva said. "It was very risky to escape because if they had caught me, they would have beaten me up badly."

Kochneva said her captors let down their guard because she had spent some five months in captivity and had not tried to run away.

"I escaped in a very simple way: I just opened the door and walked away silently," Kochneva said. She then walked through fields until she found a resident to help her.

Kochneva said she plans to return to Syria and hopes to receive citizenship from the country and work in its government.

"I am on the side of the truth. There is the truth and there is virtual reality, which Western media are painting," Kochneva said. "There is a legitimate government, which the majority of the population supports."

Syrian Ambassador Said Aqil welcomed Kochneva's safe escape and said he would lobby for her receiving Syrian citizenship.

"Ankhar is a very important person for us. She is a very objective person, a person who knows the truth," Aqil said. "Ankhar Kochneva is a fighter for peace and truth."

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