

Norwegian Journalists Arrested in Sochi Region

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November 06, 2013

The  Moscow Times

Two Norwegian journalists on their way to report on preparations in Sochi were repeatedly detained and threatened with imprisonment by Russian authorities over the weekend.

Between Oct. 31 and Nov. 2, Oystein Bogen and Aage Aunes, correspondents for Norway's TV2 television station, the country's official broadcaster of the Sochi 2014 Games, were stopped by police six times and detained on three occasions while reporting on stories in the Republic of Adygea, which borders Sochi to the north.

Human Rights Watch reported that Russian officials questioned the journalists about their plans in Sochi, their sources, their personal lives, educational backgrounds and religious beliefs.

An officer also accused Bogen of using narcotics and ordered him to submit to a drug test, Human Rights Watch said in a statement. Bogen has denied the Russian authorities'

allegations.

The journalists were denied contact with the Norwegian Embassy in Moscow, the human rights organization reported.

"I have been working in Russia since 1995, including in the North Caucasus and many other places, and have never experienced anything remotely similar. They were clearly targeting us and trying to get our sources," Bogen told Human Rights Watch.

"We were shocked to hear about what happened to the Norwegian journalists," said Johann Bihr, head of Eastern Europe & Central Asia desk at Reporters Without Borders, in a telephone interview. "The treatment they received was scandalous. Their arbitrary detention, intimidation and constant harassment should not have occurred."

These arrests come amid Russia's efforts to tighten security and information controls for the upcoming Sochi Olympic Games. In October, Russia's Federal Security Service announced that demonstrations and access to several territories around Sochi would be limited for security reasons, a move which international observers have said would restrict the free coverage of the games.

The Guardian also reported that the FSB would monitor all communications in Sochi with SORM, Russia's system for intercepting telephone and electronic communications.

Jane Buchanan, associate director for Europe and Central Asia at Human Rights Watch, urged the International Olympic Committee in an online statement to demand a full explanation of the Norwegian journalists' detention from Russian authorities and insist that no other journalists be subjected to similar intimidation or harassment.

Bogen and Aunes are not the first journalists to be targeted in the Sochi region. Nikolai Yarst, a journalist for Russian Public Television who was investigating local police corruption, was arrested in May on dubious drug charges, a case that Reporters Without Borders believes was fabricated. Yarst is currently under strict house arrest.

"We believe that the arrest of the Norwegian journalists was meant to serve as an example," Bihr said. "We urge journalists not to be intimidated. There is nothing criminal in meeting with local activists and protecting sources."

Reporters Without Borders, a Paris-based international non-profit organization that defends freedom of expression and information, annually publishes a press freedom index. In 2013, Russia ranked 148 out of 179 countries, finishing behind Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Tajikistan.

Since 2000, 33 journalists have been killed in Russia for motives related to their profession. In 2012, 34 attacks on journalists were recorded throughout the country.

While freedom of the press remains problematic in Russia, Reporters Without Borders refuses to generalize the complex realities of the Russian information space, insisting that local conditions in Sochi greatly differ from those found in Russia's other cities and regions.

"Sochi is not Beijing. We encourage journalists to use the games as an opportunity to see what is hidden behind the scenes," Bihr said.

Russia's Foreign Ministry apologized over the incident Wednesday, saying local law enforcement officials had abused their posts, leading to "a series of unwarranted actions toward the citizens of Norway," Reuters reported.

"In this regard we apologize to Mr Bogen and Mr Aunes. ... We would like to assure you that the executive authorities of the Russian Federation will take all necessary measures to avoid the repetition of similar cases in the future," the ministry said in a statement sent to Reuters.

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/11/06/norwegian-journalists-arrested-in-sochi-region-a29268>