

Ukraine Activist's Story of Torture Fuels Opposition Fears

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Dmytro Bulatov seen on Jan. 13. **Maks Levin**

KIEV, Ukraine — The bloody images of Ukrainian opposition supporter Dmytro Bulatov, who says he was abducted and tortured for more than a week, have fueled fears among anti-government activists that extrajudicial squads are being deployed to intimidate the protest movement.

Bulatov, who was in charge of a vocal protest group before he disappeared on Jan. 22, recounted a gruesome ordeal, saying his unidentified kidnappers beat him, sliced off part of his ear and nailed him to a door during his time in captivity.

"There isn't a spot on my body that hasn't been beaten. My face has been cut. They promised to poke my eye out. They cut off my ear," Bulatov, 35, said Friday in a short video from his hospital ward. "They crucified me by nailing me to a door with something and beat me strongly all the while."

The government has faced two months of major protests that started after Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych backed out of an agreement to deepen ties with the European Union in favor of Russia. The demonstrations quickly grew into discontent over heavy-handed police, corruption and human rights violations.

Some opposition leaders believe the government will do anything to save itself, including sending brutal squads of torturers to quash the demonstrations.

Prominent opposition figure Oleksandr Turchynov accused the government of being behind the attacks on Bulatov and other activists.

"Ukraine has experienced a merger of law enforcement bodies and criminal structures, which function as a single entity that uses criminal structures to kill and intimidate and to set cars on fire," Turchynov told reporters. "The authorities are using criminal structures to fight against the opposition and its own people."

The Interior Ministry said it was investigating Bulatov's story, but it also accused him of failing to cooperate. Oleh Tatarov, deputy chief of the Interior Ministry's main investigative department, said Bulatov's kidnapping could have been staged in order to create a provocation.

Later Friday, the ministry dispatched investigators to Bulatov's hospital to interrogate him, saying that besides being a kidnapping victim, he was also suspected of organizing mass disorders in the protests. Opposition lawmakers and Bulatov's supporters feared he was about to be arrested and rushed to the hospital to shield him from police. The standoff continued late into the evening.

Yanukovych adviser Hanna Herman urged a thorough investigation into Bulatov's disappearance. But she also branded Turchynov a "provocateur" and accused the opposition of seeking to further inflame tensions instead of working toward a compromise in the protests, which call for Yanukovych's resignation and other demands.

"I think the opposition now is doing all it can to again ignite the situation which had already begun to calm down," Herman said.

Bulatov's group, car owners known as Automaidan, started out by picketing the residences of top government officials and their allies, but soon took an active part in the protests that have rocked Ukraine. The group, which took its name from Kiev's Independence Square, known as Maidan, blocked streets and monitored police cars.

Bulatov went missing on Jan. 22, prompting his friends to organize a campaign for his release. They pleaded with top government officials for assistance, offered a \$25,000 bounty to anyone who could help locate him and even consulted psychics, fellow activist Oleksiy Hrytsenko said.

Hrytsenko grew all the more worried about Bulatov's fate because Automaidan members' cars were being torched and their activists detained, harassed and threatened. Hrytsenko showed a reporter a text message he received from an unknown number that read: "Go ahead, go ahead, your mother will be happy to see her son dead."

Bulatov was dumped in a forest Thursday night after eight days in captivity and made it to a house outside Kiev where he got help and was able to call friends, according to an Interior Ministry statement. He went missing one day after Igor Lutsenko, another prominent opposition activist who had also disappeared, was discovered after being taken to woods and beaten severely by unknown attackers.

Lutsenko was kidnapped from a hospital, where he had brought a fellow protester, Yury Verbitsky, to be treated for an eye injury. Verbitsky was also beaten severely along with Lutsenko and was later discovered dead.

An investigative journalist and an active leader of the protests, Tetyana Chernovil, was also badly beaten outside Kiev in late December.

Lutsenko says he spent some eight hours spread on the floor of what looked like a garage in an unknown location, as about 10 people beat him in a way to leave few visible marks, but to cause severe pain. All the while, the attackers interrogated Lutsenko about the protest movement, he said.

"They are very professional about beating people," Lutsenko said in a recent interview with a Ukrainian television channel. "Their goal was to put pressure on us, to punish us."

The reported beatings and intimidation stoked speculation that special security teams were roaming Ukraine and hunting down opposition activists.

"The Ukrainian authorities have now introduced real death squads to the political scene of the country," wrote political commentator Vitaly Portnikov.

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton issued a statement Friday saying she was "appalled by the obvious signs of prolonged torture and cruel treatment" of Bulatov. She also condemned the death of Verbitsky.

"These are but two cases of the continuous deliberate targeting of organizers and participants of peaceful protests," Ashton said. "All such acts are unacceptable and must immediately be stopped."

The mysterious kidnappings of the activists also leave unclear the motives of those behind them, because each time they have only served to energize the protests.

"I would like to tell you that we will not be frightened. We have no intention to stop," Bulatov said.

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