

Journalist Organizations Urge End to Harassment of Media in Crimea

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March 04, 2014



Journalists standing in front of a line of troops at the Belbek airbase in Crimea.

International media rights advocates say independent journalists are getting attacked and harassed while trying to cover events in the autonomous republic of Crimea, which has been occupied by pro-Russian forces.

OSCE representative on freedom of the media Dunja Mijatovic and the New-York-based Committee to Protect Journalists have called on Ukrainian authorities to secure the safety of Ukrainian journalists based in Crimea after three separate incidents of local media harassment since last weekend.

On Sunday, about 30 armed, masked men stormed and briefly occupied the office of the Center for Investigative Journalism based in Crimea's administrative center, Simferopol. One day later, Crimea's State Television and Radio Transmitting Center removed the popular independent broadcaster Chernomorskaya Teleradiokompaniya, or Black Sea television, off

the air.

An unidentified individual assaulted Tatyana Rikhtun, chief editor of the Sevastopol-based news website 911Sevastopol, on Monday and seized her camera as she was filming Russian soldiers who had surrounded the headquarters of the Ukrainian navy in Sevastopol.

When The Moscow Times repeatedly phoned the offices of Crimea's State Television and Radio Transmitting Center, Chernomorskaya Teleradiokompaniya, the Center for Investigative Journalism and 911Sevastopol throughout Tuesday, the phone lines remained busy.

"We call on all parties involved in the crisis in Ukraine to allow journalists to report safely, freely, and without fear of reprisal," the Committee to Protect Journalists' Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator Nina Ognianova said in a statement.

In turn, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Mijatovic said that "in difficult and sensitive situations such as the current one in Ukraine, media freedom and plurality of opinions must be ensured." Mijatovic was scheduled to visit Ukraine from March 4 to 7.

On Monday, the Council of Ministers of Crimea also issued a statement "threatening to stop the rebroadcast of a number of Ukrainian channels from Kiev," the OSCE said.

But a local deputy speaking by phone to The Moscow Times Tuesday denied that the statement existed.

"This is yet another fantasy and total rubbish," Konstantin Bakharev, a senior Crimean lawmaker said. "We have not shut anyone because this is impossible," he said.

Bakharev accused the "central television channels of Crimea" of "whipping up hysteria." He said their reports that Crimea "has turned into nothing but a hot zone" were "absolutely untrue."

The deputy attributed the "specific bias" of some local media, which he refused to name, to "serving the interests of the acting authorities" of Ukraine.

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Original url:

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