

Kidnapped U.S. Journalist Is 'Bargaining Chip' in Ukraine

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April 23, 2014



U.S. journalist Simon Ostrovsky's current whereabouts are unknown.

As friends and family waited impatiently to hear from Simon Ostrovsky, the journalist kidnapped by pro-Russian insurgents Monday, an image of a scantily dressed woman crawling across a bed appeared on his Facebook page, likely the work of hackers.

Later Wednesday, the self-proclaimed mayor of the Ukrainian city of Slovyansk said he would not free Ostrovsky.

"We need prisoners," Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, the "people's mayor" of Slovyansk, told Gazeta.ru. "We need bargaining chips. Many of our comrades are behind bars. They [the Ukrainian security forces] take them to Kiev and torture them. Now we are doing the same. Taking prisoners, that is."

Stella Khoroshego, a spokeswoman for the self-appointed authorities of Slovyansk, told

The Associated Press that Ostrovsky was "fine" and that he had been detained on suspicion of "bad activities," without elaborating on their nature.

Ponomaryov told Interfax that Ostrovsky was an informant for Ukraine's Right Sector far-right nationalist party, the news agency reported.

Ostrovsky, a journalist at Vice News and former Moscow Times reporter, had been covering the crisis in Ukraine for the past weeks. He had presented a series of bold video dispatches called "Russian Roulette: The Invasion of Ukraine," in which he regularly challenged armed men with blunt questions and sharp observations.

Ostrovsky's whereabouts remain unknown. Pro-Russian insurgents denied that Ostrovsky was being held at the local state security building.

The self-appointed leaders of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk contradicted Ponomaryov and Khoroshego, denying the involvement of pro-Russian militants in the kidnapping of Ostrovsky and other journalists.

"We can neither confirm nor exclude the possibility that any foreign journalists have been kidnapped," a spokesman for Yekaterina Gubareva, the self-styled foreign minister of the Donetsk People's Republic, told The Moscow Times on Wednesday. "All we can say is that we [the Donetsk People's Republic] have not done this. This could be a provocation."

The spokesman cited the [case of Volodymyr Rybak](#), a member of acting Ukrainian President Oleksandr Turchynov's party, who was found dead Tuesday after reportedly being abducted by pro-Russian forces and tortured, as an example of a "provocation" aimed at discrediting regional self-appointed authorities.

"We had nothing to do with the incident [involving Rybak] and we have stated this clearly," the spokesman said. "It was a provocation. The same could be true about stories of kidnapped foreign journalists."

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe released a statement Tuesday calling for Ostrovsky's immediate release and expressing concern about the "ongoing negative pattern in relation to journalists' safety in Ukraine."

Earlier this week, Irma Krat, a Ukrainian journalist and pro-government activist, was taken hostage by pro-Russian forces in Slovyansk. The 29-year-old journalist was later brought out blindfolded and paraded outside the city's security service building, where she confirmed that she was being detained and had not been harmed.

Belarussian reporter Dmitry Galka, as well as French and Italian journalists Paul Gogo and Kossimo Attanasio, were also detained in Slovyansk on Monday but were released a few hours later.

"My colleagues were trying to capture the daily life of the city on camera," Galka, who is currently reporting from Donetsk, told The Moscow Times in a telephone interview Wednesday. "Then suddenly three armed young men in camouflage [gear] showed up and accused them of being European spies. We were pushed into the backseat of a car and taken to what we think was the center of their operations."

Galka said that the reporters' passports and equipment had been confiscated but returned to them upon their release.

"One of the men was on the phone, most likely speaking with his superiors," Galka said. "And all of a sudden, we were told we could leave. And the armed men even told us we could be photographed with them. We used this picture as a 'pass' when we were stopped by other militants after our release."

A Moscow Times reporter was also briefly detained by pro-Russian insurgents in Slovyansk on April 15. His belongings were personally searched by Ponomaryov, the self-appointed mayor.

Vice News, Ostrovsky's employer, released a statement Tuesday saying that the organization was "in contact with the U.S. State Department and other appropriate government authorities" to ensure the journalist's safety and security.

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters in Washington during Tuesday's daily briefing that the department condemned the hostage takings but that it did not have any additional information on Ostrovsky's case.

Ukraine currently ranks 127th in Reporters Without Borders' 2014 Freedom of the Press Index, behind Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uganda. Russia ranks 148th.

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Original url:

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