The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

European Military Observers Report no Mistreatment

April 27, 2014



Pro-Russian demonstrators in Kharkiv waving flags at a rally on Sunday.

Eight European military observers held prisoner by pro-Russian insurgents in eastern Ukraine appeared in public Sunday and gave assurances that they were not being mistreated, but there was no indication they would be released soon.

The insurgents in Slovyansk have taken a number of people hostage, including journalists and pro-Ukraine activists, as they strengthen their control in the east of the country in defiance of the interim government in Kiev and its Western supporters. On Sunday, they captured three Ukrainian security service officers, who were shown to Russian journalists bloodied and blindfolded with packing tape.

Colonel Axel Schneider from Germany, who spoke for the group of military observers, stressed that they were on a diplomatic mission under the auspices of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe when detained Friday and were not spying for NATO, as the insurgents claim. The observers, who appeared nervous, were in the custody of armed men wearing camouflage fatigues and black balaclavas, who escorted them into the Slovyansk

city hall for the news conference and led them away afterward. Schneider, however, said they were being treated as well as possible under the circumstances.

"The mayor of this city granted us his protection and he regarded us as his guests," Schneider told journalists in Slovyansk, which has become the center of the pro-Russia insurgency in eastern Ukraine. "I can tell you that the word of the mayor is a word of honor. We have not been touched."

Schneider said he no information about when they would be released and that this was a matter for diplomats of their countries. In addition to three German officers and a civilian interpreter, the group also includes officers from Poland, Sweden, Denmark and the Czech Republic.

The German colonel said he understood that the self-proclaimed mayor, Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, could use the observers as a bargaining chip.

"Our presence here in Slovyansk is for sure a political instrument for the decision makers here in the region and the possibility to use it for negotiations," Schneider said. "It is logical in the eyes of Mayor Ponomaryov that he can use us to present his positions."

Ponomaryov said Saturday that the European observers could be released in exchange for jailed pro-Russian activists.

The mayor has refused to specify how many Ukrainian journalists and activists his forces have detained, but he suggested it was several dozen.

On Sunday, the insurgents captured three Ukrainian security service officers, who were shown to journalists in the security service headquarters in Slovyansk. Stripped of their trousers and shoes, they sat with heads bowed.

Igor Strelkov, who has been identified as the commander of the armed insurgents, said the three Ukrainian officers were on a mission to seize leaders of the pro-Russian force when they were captured.

Ukraine's security service confirmed that its officers had been seized by armed men. The officers were on a mission to detain a Russian citizen suspected in the killing of a Ukrainian parliament member, the agency said in a statement.

A crowd of pro-Russian activists has stormed the television broadcasting center in Donetsk, the regional capital of eastern Ukraine.

They are demanding the suspension of broadcasts of Ukrainian-language channels and the restoration of Russian state channels.

The interim government in Kiev last month blocked the broadcasts of Russian channels, which serve as propaganda tools for the Kremlin.

The crowd of several hundred that stormed the broadcasting center on Sunday included

several dozen men wearing camouflage fatigues and face masks.

Such pro-Russia forces have seized government buildings in at least 10 cities in eastern Ukraine. *(Associated Press)*

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