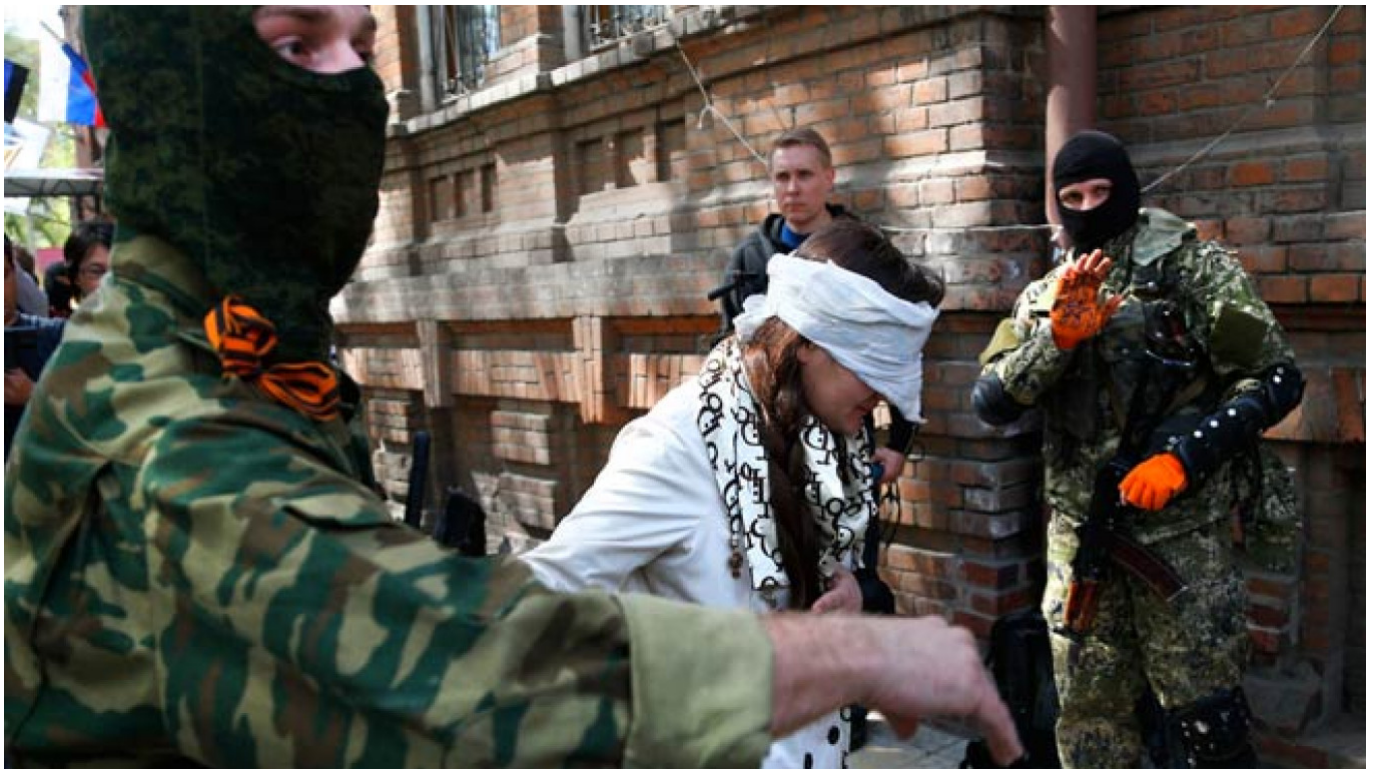


Kidnappings Undermine Ukraine Separatists' Claim to Legitimacy

By [Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber](#)

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Pro-Ukrainian journalist Irma Krat was paraded blindfolded last week by pro-Russian insurgents in Sloviansk.

Bruised, half-undressed Ukrainian security forces officers, weary-looking observers from the OSCE and blindfolded journalists have all been paraded in front of shocked audiences in recent days as hostages of the Donetsk region's pro-Russian militants.

The self-appointed "people's mayor" of Sloviansk, Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, has not shied away from showing off his captives to the public, describing them as "bargaining chips" and "prisoners of war." In doing so, some analysts say, the leaders of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk have killed off any chance they might have had of claiming legitimacy.

Earlier this month, Yekaterina Gubareva, the republic's self-appointed "foreign minister," told The Moscow Times that the People's Republic of Donetsk was writing a constitution

and creating its own armed forces to "bolster the legitimacy" of a planned May 11 referendum on the region's status.

But any claim to legitimacy appears to be undermined by the recent hostage takings, which contravene the Geneva Convention.

"The way in which the OSCE observers and Ukrainian security forces were presented to the public as prisoners is abhorrent and a severe violation of their dignity," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said in a statement released Sunday. "This is a violation of all negotiating rules and norms that prevail in tense situations like this one."

But the self-appointed authorities of the Donetsk People's Republic are not after the legitimacy they claim to be seeking, according to political analyst Alexei Makarkin.

"The behavior of the self-appointed authorities of the Donetsk People's Republic is dictated by what they truly want," said Makarkin, deputy director of the Moscow-based Center for Political Technologies. "And legitimacy is not part of the equation."

Makarkin said the separatists' actions were primarily meant to demonstrate loyalty to Russia.

"They [the Donetsk popular authorities] do not think that the West needs to recognize them, that they need to prove anything," he said. "They want to show Russia that they are strong, that they are waging a war against the West. And Russia, at least for now, is on their side."

The Russian government has refused to openly condemn militancy in eastern Ukraine. Pro-Kremlin analyst Alexei Mukhin said that the hostage takings in Slovyansk are not emblematic of the whole region's political aspirations.

"The behavior of one strange mayor [Ponomaryov of Slovyansk] cannot be applied to the whole region," said Mukhin, who is general director of the Center for Political Information.

The contradictory statements of the self-appointed regional and local authorities indicate that there is a disconnect between the two levels, he said.

Last week, Foreign Minister Gubareva's spokesman said that the republic did not support the kidnapping of foreign journalists and that the hostage takings could have been a "provocation," contradicting Ponomaryov's confession to the kidnapping of Vice News reporter and former Moscow Times journalist Simon Ostrovsky.

Mukhin said that the notion that Russian special services were behind the unrest in the Donetsk region was "[U.S. President Barack] Obama's invention," echoing Moscow's repeated denials that it is supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine.

"The situation is changing very quickly," said Makarkin of the Center of Political Technologies. "In these circumstances, we can expect changing positions. But for now, Russia does not perceive the actions of these self-appointed authorities to be criminal."

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