

Ukrainian Authorities Claim Detained Russian Journalists Had Missile

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A screenshot from a YouTube video purportedly showing two Russian journalists and an unidentified third detainee being held by Ukrainian soldiers.

Ukrainian authorities have alleged that two Russian reporters detained by the country's security forces were armed and involved in terrorism amid growing Russian and international appeals for their release.

The deputy secretary of Ukraine's National Security Defense Council, Viktoria Syumar, told Ukraine's Channel 5 on Monday that a portable anti-aircraft missile was found in the vehicle of Oleg Sidiyakin and Marat Saichenko, two reporters from Russia's LifeNews Internet portal and television channel.

"Whether they were helping someone transport it [the portable anti-aircraft missile] or using it themselves needs to be clarified at this point," Syumar said. "This is a classic case of undercover work."

Syumar said her organization had received video and photographic evidence that the reporters "always worked together with terrorists during attacks and killings."

President Vladimir Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, said Tuesday that Russia was demanding the immediate release of Sidiyakin and Saichenko, who were detained near the eastern city of Kramatorsk on Sunday.

The Foreign Ministry also published a statement Monday saying it "wished to remind Mrs. Syumar and the country's political actors that fighting against undesirable journalists is not the best way to convince the world and the Ukrainian people that the authorities in Kiev are committed to freedom and democracy."

The editor-in-chief of LifeNews, Anatoly Suleimanov, vehemently denied Syumar's suggestion that the reporters had been collaborating with pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine.

"I am sure that if the Ukrainian authorities looked a little harder, they would even find a tank in that car," Suleimanov said in a telephone interview with The Moscow Times.

"Marat [Saichenko] is the best paparazzi in Russia. Ukrainian authorities only need to Google him to see that he is always at the heart of the action, that he records everything. Thousands of journalists in Russia know Marat. If he were involved in any kind of wrongdoing, everyone would know about it."

Suleimanov also said that video and photographic evidence of what Ukrainian authorities claim to be proof of the reporters' ties to terrorism had been shot while they were reporting from the field. He said that Sidiyakin, who has worked for LifeNews for six months, had his picture taken with weapons when he was reporting from a shooting range in the Moscow region.

"A picture of me holding a knife as I prepare to cut a watermelon does not make me a terrorist, does it?" Suleimanov said.

LifeNews, which has built its reputation around its tabloid coverage, is notorious for its sensational reports and its loyalty to Russian authorities, and is widely believed to have links to Russian security services.

But observers like Ivan Zassoursky, head of the Faculty of New Media and Communication Theory at Moscow State University, argued that the journalistic shortcomings of the media agency — which he compared to Fox News during George W. Bush's presidency — do not mean that its reporters are being used as pawns in the conflict in Ukraine.

"Anything is possible, of course," Zassoursky said. "But I believe Ukrainian authorities are lying about the anti-aircraft missile they said they found in the reporters' vehicle. Why did they wait so long to announce that they had found a weapon? The reporters have been detained for three days and only now do the authorities bring up the existence of a weapon."

Since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, both pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine and the country's authorities have been accused of hindering journalists' work. The leaders of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk have held hostage a number of Ukrainian

and foreign journalists, as well as OSCE monitors.

Earlier this month, Yuri Leliavski, a reporter for Ukrainian television channel Zik, and Pavel Kanygin, a journalist for the independent Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta, were released after being kept captive. Leliavski had spent two weeks in detention.

The Ukrainian authorities have also expelled a number of Russian journalists from the country, including LifeNews' Yulia Shustraya and Mikhail Pudovkin in late April. Authorities also put under house arrest Belarusian television producer Stepan Chirich, employed by Russia's state-owned NTV channel, for allegedly attempting to obtain classified information.

Ukraine ranks 127th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2014 Freedom of the Press Index, behind Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Russia ranks 148th.

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