

Slovyansk Mayor Says Chechens May Be Holding OSCE Monitors

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May 30, 2014



Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, the self-styled Slovyansk mayor.

OSCE monitors who disappeared in eastern Ukraine may be being held by Chechen fighters who do not report to Ukraine's separatists, the self-styled mayor of Slovyansk has said.

The four monitors, who the European security watchdog lost contact with earlier this week, "disappeared in the Luhansk region," Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, the self-styled Slovyansk mayor, told Ekho Moskvyy radio on Thursday.

"I told them not to go anywhere for a week," Ponomaryov said. "But they ignored [it], well, I'm sorry. Especially since they hit upon non-Slavic resistance fighters."

While Ponomaryov did not further identify the group, the only "non-Slavic" force that has emerged in eastern Ukraine recently is a militia of Chechen natives, who have reportedly come from Russia — though Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov has denied sending or controlling

the forces.

Another ethnic group whose representatives have reportedly been involved in the conflict are Cossacks, who Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Deshchytsia blamed for the disappearance of the OSCE team in an interview with Bloomberg television earlier this week, but Cossacks are a Slavic people.

Ponomaryov told Ekho Moskvu that while traveling from Sloviansk, in the Donetsk region, to the neighboring self-styled separatist republic of Luhansk was "not exactly prohibited — it's not prohibited," he warned the monitors "not to go anywhere."

"But it looks like some group did not understand. So we are having this situation now."

The lack of understanding between various separatist factions has become increasingly visible in recent weeks.

On Thursday, fighters from the Vostok battalion — a militia that includes Chechens and Russians — took over the main building of the "People's Republic of Donetsk," evicting the self-styled separatist administration that had been ensconced there for most of the past two months.

After a period of initial confusion, civilian separatists denied any falling out between the two rebel groups, with a Donetsk republic spokeswoman saying the Vostok fighters had come to help "weed out criminals," The Washington Post reported, citing a Donetsk Republic spokeswoman.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said it had lost contact with its four monitors on Monday, after the team last checked in on a road, heading from Donetsk to Dnipropetrovsk to the west. Luhansk, where Ponomaryov said the monitors went missing, lies in the opposite direction.

Ponomayov told Interfax earlier Thursday that the OSCE monitors — a Dane, an Estonian, a Swiss, and a Turk — were fine and that his administration knew where they were being held. But in the Thursday afternoon interview with Ekho Moskvu, he brushed off concerns about "some four strange people" and any chance that he would help secure their release.

"These people are not held by us," Ponomaryov told Ekho Moskvu, adding that his powers did not extend to freeing the monitors: "I am not a military commander-in-chief, I'm not the head of some service."

The emergence of Chechen and Russian fighters as powerful players in the conflict has stoked fears that Russia may be getting deeper into the fray in Ukraine.

Ukraine's acting president Oleksandr Turchynov said the missile used by separatist fighters to down a transport helicopter on Thursday had also been supplied by Russia, Ukraine's Segodnya reported.

The assault killed more than a dozen Ukrainian servicemen, including a senior security official, and dealt a setback to the Ukrainian government's operation against separatist rebels.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry voiced concerns Thursday about Chechen fighters and reiterated calls to Russia to "de-escalate" tensions in eastern Ukraine.

"There is evidence of Russians crossing over, trained personnel from Chechnya trained in Russia who've come across to stir things up, to engage in fighting," Kerry said in an interview with PBS NewsHour.

But Moscow denies accusations of waging a proxy war, and Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin has blamed the disappearance of the OSCE monitors on the Ukrainian government's failure to ensure their security.

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