

Kiev Government Tells Ukrainians Not to Talk to Russian Reporters

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The Ukrainian media watchdog agency has urged citizens to refrain from comments to Russian journalists.

As rhetorical sallies between Russia and Ukraine get increasingly bitter, the Ukrainian media watchdog agency has urged citizens to refrain from comments to Russian journalists, whom it accused of circulating brazen lies and distortions.

"Every day, informational provocations by Russian journalists are becoming more impudent," the Ukrainian Television & Radio Committee said in a statement Wednesday. "Their goal is to discredit the Ukrainian army, anti-terrorism forces and the Ukrainian authorities."

"The Russian information sphere is overflowing with lies and innuendos," the statement said. "We are asking Ukrainian citizens, representatives of civic organizations, government agencies to refrain from providing Russian media with comments, interviews, informational

messages, because all of this can be used against Ukraine and our citizens."

Ukraine has good reason to be concerned. Russia's state-run Channel One television came under fire this month for airing what it described as an eye-witness account of a 3-year-old boy having been tortured and crucified by the Ukrainian military in an eastern town. A number of Russian politicians and journalists described the report as a new low in state-run media's coverage of the conflict.

Russian television has also been exposed as doing some downright double-dealing in its footage.

The state-run Rossia channel used footage from its 2012 report about a gunfight in the North Caucasus to illustrate a newscast this spring about supposed violence against pro-Russian civilians in Ukraine. When the substitution was exposed, the deputy chief of a government media holding that includes Rossia, Dmitry Kiselyov, attributed it to an "accidental error."

But what has widely been described as an information war between the two former Soviet neighbors appears to have taken a toll on Ukraine's freedom of expression as well.

This week, Ukraine's Culture Ministry said it was banning the distribution of two Russian movies, accusing them of displaying "contempt" toward Ukraine and distorting historical facts in favor of Russia.

Ukraine has also denied Russian journalists entry to the country, and both government forces and pro-Moscow separatists have been guilty of detaining, questioning and intimidating scores of Russian and Western reporters, according to a summary published by press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders this week.

Ukraine has made some gains in press freedom following its previous, peaceful and pro-democratic "Orange Revolution" protests of 2004, prompting the Freedom House rights watchdog to upgrade the country from "not free" to "partly free" that year.

But a series of attacks against journalists during popular protests against Ukraine's subsequent Moscow-backed administration last year led the organization to reverse the rating, downgrading Ukraine to "not free" once again.

New Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's handling of the ongoing conflict between pro-Moscow insurgents and government troops in eastern Ukraine has also prompted concerns from international rights groups.

The director of the Human Rights Watch group's Europe and Central Asia division, Hugh Williamson, said in an open letter to Poroshenko this month that while the Kiev government is "entitled" to carry out military operations against the insurgency, it also "has obligations never to direct attacks at civilians."

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