Ukraine Security Service Detains Journalist on Charges of Treason

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Ruslan Kotsaba

Ukrainian authorities have detained a journalist on suspicion of treason after he released a video calling for his countrymen to avoid military draft amid the conflict between pro-Russian rebels and Kiev government forces in the east of the country.

Security agents have taken Ruslan Kotsaba, a journalist in largely Kiev-loyal western Ukraine, into custody and have confiscated materials that could implicate him in the crime, Ukrainian Security Service adviser Markian Lubkivskyi said Sunday on his Facebook page.

The detention comes after Kotsaba last month posted a video on YouTube that criticized the government's handling of the conflict and demanded that Ukrainian men avoid the military draft: "I call on all reasonable, adequate people to denounce this mobilization, because this hell, this horror, must be stopped," he said in the video, released Jan. 17.

More than 75,000 Ukrainians received draft notices in January alone, Ukraine's Zn.ua news site reported. But with United Nations estimates released in February suggesting the conflict has already killed more than 5,300 people, the latest wave of mobilization has run into reluctance and instances of draft dodging.

Protesters rallied against the draft in a number of Ukrainian regions, and General Staff spokesman Oleh Boiko said men have been trying to avoid military service, RFE/RL's Ukrainian service reported late January.

In his video, Kotsaba, a journalist from the western city of Ivano-Frankivsk, appealed to President Petro Poroshenko, reminding the Ukrainian leader of his pledge to find a political resolution to the bloodshed.

He also urged Poroshenko to hold talks with separatist leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Barack Obama — "with anybody you want to, because this must be stopped," Kotsaba said.

After signing a decree that outlined Ukraine's mobilization schedule for this year, Poroshenko said "new forces were needed to join the army to replace those who went to the front lines earlier," according to Ukrainian media reports.

Putin responded by suggesting that Ukrainian men of conscription age should cross the border to Russia and "wait things out a while." "They are right to do this because there, they are simply being sent as cannon fodder to face the bullets," Putin reportedly said.

The conflict in the Donbass has led to a surge of patriotism in both Ukraine and Russia, which endorses the separatists but denies arming rebel fighters.

At the end of last month, a mother of seven was detained in Russia on charges of treason, after she allegedly called the Ukrainian Embassy to warn diplomats that troops may be moving toward their country.

Kotsaba was detained after a local activist in Ivano-Frankivsk, Taras Demyaniv, appealed to the security service to investigate the journalist for possible treason, Ukraine's Institute of Mass Information reported late January.

The Security Service of Ukraine, or SBU, indicated it was looking into the journalist's activities, but said at that time that no charges had been brought, according to the report.

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