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Ukraine Backtracks on Some Media Sanctions After Criticism

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Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has asked his government to remove six European journalists from a newly published sanctions list, officials said Thursday, after the list was criticized by the country's Western allies.

Poroshenko signed a decree on Wednesday imposing restrictions on more than 900 people for reasons of "national security" after pro-Russian separatists who have seized parts of Ukraine set a date for what Kiev sees as "illegal elections."

While mostly made up of Russians and separatists, the list included 34 journalists and seven bloggers from countries including Britain, Germany and Spain, damaging Ukraine's pro-democracy image among its backers in the conflict with Russia.

"Freedom of the press is of absolute value to me," spokesman Svyatoslav Tsegolko quoted Poroshenko as saying in a post on Twitter, in which he said Poroshenko had ordered the security council to take three BBC journalists off the list.

A security council spokeswoman said later the names of two Spanish correspondents and a German correspondent would also be removed.

The journalist bans attracted criticism from Johannes Hahn, the European Union's commissioner in charge of enlargement.

"I am surprised and I am concerned and I will certainly discuss it with the colleagues in Ukraine because this is not European in spirit," he said in Brussels.

International watchdogs, the Committee to Protect Journalists and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, said the sanctions would restrict media freedom.

"Introducing over-broad restrictions that curb free movement of journalists is not the way to ensure security," the OSCE's Dunja Mijatovic said in a statement.

The United States and the European Union have imposed their own sanctions on Russia in the crisis, in which Moscow has annexed Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula and nearly 8,000 people have been killed in a separatist conflict that Kiev and NATO accuse the Kremlin of stoking. Russia denies any involvement in the fighting.

Ukraine's sanctions decision could have a "corrosive effect" on important foreign partnerships, Andreas Umland, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation in Kiev said in a Facebook post.

"It is frustrating to note how low the Ukrainian government's expertise on the basics of international affairs and cultural diplomacy is. The list of banned persons is another public relations disaster for Kiev that is already being utilized by Ukraine's enemies," he said.

On Thursday, Russia said the inclusion of journalists on the sanctions list was "totally unacceptable."

"It does not correspond with the principles of freedom ... We very strongly condemn this decision," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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