

The Crimea: kidnapping of journalists and civil activists

Several Ukrainian activists and journalists have been kidnapped in the Crimea by so-called ‘vigilantes’ and representatives of the ‘Crimean Self-defence Forces’. Their whereabouts remain unknown. Among those kidnapped are Crimean activists - **Andrey Shchekun** and **Anatoliy Kovalskiy**, members of the **AutoMaidan** movement – **Yekaterina Butko**, **Alexandra Ryazantseva**, journalists **Yelena Maksimenko** and **Oles Kromples**, as well as a driver, **Yevgeniy Rakhno**.

On the morning of 9 March, 2014, at the Simferopol railway station, Crimean activists **Andrey Shchekun** and **Anatoliy Kovalskiy** were detained by ‘vigilantes’. They arrived at the station in order to pick up a parcel (with attributes of Ukrainian symbolism - ribbons and flags) from the train arriving from Kiev. At that time, they were attacked by a group of so-called ‘vigilantes’. *"While my father was standing on the platform, Shchekun got on the train... A whole unit of men ran onto the train, and the activist was literally pushed out of the train onto the platform, the men also surrounded my father. The men began to beat them, not so much to cause physical damage as to humiliate them"*, - Sergey Kovalskiy, the son of Anatoliy Kovalskiy, reported. According to Sergey, first his father and Andrey Shchekun were taken to the line police station at the railway station, but then the police referred them to unknown persons and they disappeared. Sergey Kovalskiy stated that the co-chairman of the movement ‘Russkoye Yedinstvo’ [‘Russian Unity’][1], Sergey Tsekov had confirmed that the detained activists were in their hands. Later, this was denied by members of the ‘Russkoye Yedinstvo’. According to Sergey Kovalskiy, his father and Andrey Shchekun are being held hostage outside of Simferopol. *"I cannot reveal the sources, but reliable information has been received that they are far from Simferopol, at least 100 km away, in different places, being held hostage in some dungeons. However, their captors are not saying what their demands are. We couldn't find the car in which they arrived at the station. No negotiations have been held with those who kidnapped them"*[2].- Sergey stated.

On 9 March, 2014, at the entrance to the Crimea from the Kherson region, a group of activists and journalists who had tried to enter the territory of the peninsula, was detained. In particular, activists of the AutoMaidan movement, **Yekaterina Butko** and **Alexandra Ryazantseva**, journalist of the ‘Tyzdhen’ [‘The Week’] newspaper, **Yelena Maksimenko**, press photographer **Oles Kromples**, as well as a driver **Yevgeniy Rakhno**, with whom they were travelling. The detention was carried out by officers of the Crimean Special Police ‘Berkut’, representatives of the ‘Crimean Self-defence Forces’, as well as Russian soldiers. All detainees were taken away to an unknown destination. *"At Perekop they were stopped, their car was turned completely upside-down and as the officers found video cameras, they threw them on the ground. The travellers were taken in an unknown direction. Now there is no communication with them"*, - Yevgeniy Rakhno’s wife, Yekaterina Abiyeva, reported.

According to information obtained by ‘Ukrainskaya Pravda’, activists of the ‘AutoMaidan’ were kept in the camp of ‘Berkut’ forces, but then they were taken to the headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol.[3] Yelena Maksimenko, Oles Kromples and Yevgeniy Rakhno, according to unconfirmed reports, were brought to the department of the Security Service of Ukraine in Crimea (which is currently controlled by the ‘self-proclaimed’ Crimean government).[4]

Earlier, armed militants had not permitted observers from the OSCE to enter the Crimean Peninsula. Warning fire from automatic weapons had greeted the observers, but, fortunately, no one was hurt. The observers were sent to the Crimea at the request of the Ukrainian authorities. Currently the OSCE is discussing the directing of long-term OSCE missions to the Crimean Peninsula, but this decision has not yet been supported by Russia (according to OSCE standards, every decision must be approved by all members of the organisation).[5] In this case, the policy of double standards on the part of the leadership of the Russian Federation is clearly observed; the Kremlin does not support the idea of carrying out investigation under the auspices of the OSCE on the peninsula, but rather insists on carrying out an investigation into the events in Kiev.[6]

On 10 March, 2014, information was disseminated about the disappearance of an activist of the Sevastopol EuroMaidan, **Igor Kiryushchenko**. The activist managed to report by phone that "They had come for him" before contact with him broke off. The previous day, on 9 March, 2014, he took part in the celebrations of the 200th anniversary of Taras Shevchenko’s birthday in Sevastopol.[7]

The Open Dialog Foundation believes that the Russian government is responsible for the kidnapping of

civil society activists and journalists in the Crimea. We hereby demand their immediate release. This statement is not only due to the fact of the invasion of Russian troops and the violation of international treaties,^[8] but also to the Russian government's utmost interest in eliminating representatives of civil society who publicised incidents involving the Russian troops throughout the peninsula.

Journalists and activists of the EuroMaidan constitute a major obstacle for targeted information blockade of the Crimea by the Russian authorities. In view of the critical situation in the Crimea and the extreme importance of the presence and work of human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists on the peninsula, we hereby urge the international community to immediately employ all available methods and demand from the Russian government, the release of the detained activists and journalists.

We also call on the Ukrainian authorities to conduct an investigation into the kidnapping of journalists and civil society activists in the territory of the Crimean Autonomy.

You are welcome to support our appeal by contacting the following addresses:

- Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov - 119200 Moscow, 32/34 Smolenskaya-Sennaya Sq., tel. +7 499 244 16 06, e-mail: ministry@mid.ru
- President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin - 103132, Moscow, 23/16 Ilyinka Street, entrance No. 11, tel. +7 495 606 36 02, +7 495 910 07 66. The online contact form: <http://letters.kremlin.ru/send>

[1] The leader of the 'Russkoye Yedinstvo' is Sergey Aksenov – the 'self-proclaimed' Prime Minister of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

[2]<http://humanrights.com.ua/234-krymskykh-aktyvystov-derzhat-v-kazematakh-za-100-km-ot-symferopolia--syn-pokhyshchenoho-kovalskoho>

[3] <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2014/03/9/7018242/>

[4]https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=716044588446861&id=100001239780162&stream_ref=10

[5] http://www.bbc.co.uk/ukrainian/politics/2014/03/140308_osce_crimea_upd_ko.shtml

[6]http://espreso.tv/new/2014/03/07/moskva_zbyraye_dokazy_bezchynstv_na_maydani_i_peredaye_yikh_v_obsy_e

[7]http://ipress.ua/news/v_krymu_znykayut_lyudy_u_sevastopoli_nevidomi_vykraly_mistsevogo_aktivista_igorya_kiryushchenka_foto_53206.html

[8] http://www.odfoundation.eu/ru/urgents/1632/rossiyskaya_federatsiya_nachala_voynu_protiv_ukraini