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Fears for Ukrainian human rights activist captured by Russia

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Anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigner Maksym Butkevych was reportedly taken prisoner while fighting last month

Family and friends of a prominent Ukrainian human rights campaigner taken prisoner by Russia while fighting in eastern Ukraine have told of their fears for his safety.

Maksym Butkevych, who is well known in Ukraine for several decades' worth of anti-racist and anti-fascist activism, was captured in June near Hirske village in the Luhansk region along with other members of his unit, according to recent Ukrainian media reports.

Butkevych's capture was announced on 24 June by Russian forces, who published a video of his interrogation online. His mother, Yevheniya, told openDemocracy that she had not heard from her son since.

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“The main thing I want now is to hear him – preferably see him – on the phone, to make sure that he was not subjected to physical or psychological torture and that he is more or less OK,” she said.

It is not known where Butkevych and the rest of his unit are being held. After the video of Butkevych’s interrogation was posted online, a series of Russian-language websites described Butkevych as a far-right nationalist.

Friends and colleagues of Butkevych, who sits on the board of Amnesty International’s Ukraine section, call this propaganda.

“It’s so Orwellian,” said Yevheniia Polshchukova, a former student activist now based in France. “They literally take an anti-fascist, a human rights defender, and call him a Nazi.”

Butkevych is the co-founder of several organisations including the ZMINA human rights centre and the No Borders Project, and has worked as a journalist for outlets including the BBC World Service. He campaigns against hate speech and trains journalists on how to counter racism and discrimination in the media.

His career as a grassroots political activist stretches back to the 1990s, when he helped set up the anarchist-inclined student union “Direct Action”. For many years, he was a key organiser of protest movements throughout the years – including the annual commemoration event for Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburova, two Russian anti-fascists murdered in Moscow in 2009.

“He’s critical of human rights violations, especially those on the side of the state, regardless of the place where they’re committed, be it Ukraine or abroad,” wrote Denys Pilash, a political scientist based in Kyiv, in a recent Facebook post.

Since the late 2000s, Butkevych has focused on supporting asylum-seekers in Ukraine, helping them access housing and social support, and lobbying for reforms in the law. “Maksym was one of the first to start doing such a difficult and thankless

job,” said Iryna Fedorovych, a former colleague at the No Borders Project. In 2014, after war broke out in eastern Ukraine, Butkevych’s work expanded to helping displaced Ukrainians.

When Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in February this year, Butkevych volunteered for military service.

“I have been an anti-militarist all my conscious life and remain so by conviction,” he told Hromadske Radio in April. “[But] I will do as much as I can to protect what is most valuable.”

Victory, he added, would not only mean the liberation of Ukrainian territory. “It is also about what we will be like [afterwards] ... I hope it will not make us so cruel that we put human rights on the back burner. We fight precisely to retain the opportunity to embody the values we stand for.”

Oksana Pokalchuk, head of Amnesty International’s Ukraine section, stressed to openDemocracy that Butkevych was now a prisoner of war and called on Russia to treat him, like all other prisoners of war, “in accordance with the Geneva Conventions”.