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Ukrainian media in the crosshairs of the secret services

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Representatives of the Ukrainian media who have criticised the government have been attacked twice over the past month, and the law enforcement authorities have not yet fully cleared up the details of the incidents. On 14 January, a group of five men attempted to break into the apartment of the investigative journalist Yuriy Nikolov, who had exposed a corruption scandal in the Ministry of Defence in January 2023 (see '*Ukraine: a wave of dismissals against a background of corruption*'). The attackers wrote offensive words on his door calling him a 'traitor,' a 'provocateur' and a 'draft dodger'. Meanwhile on 16 January, videos appeared on the Internet showing the staff of the investigative outlet Bihus.Info drinking alcohol and using drugs during a New Year's Eve party. Two days earlier, this website published an article accusing President Volodymyr Zelensky's inner circle of creating an information bubble around him. Both incidents sparked criticism from the political opposition and journalists in Ukraine. Kyiv's mayor Vitali Klitschko accused the government of undermining democracy, and the parliamentary committee on freedom of speech called on the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) to find and punish the perpetrators. Journalistic organisations have pointed out that pressure on the media is beginning to resemble the situation during the government of former President Viktor Yanukovych. To limit the damage to his image, Zelensky issued a statement on 17 January emphasising that exerting any pressure on the media was unacceptable, and ordered the SBU to investigate the circumstances of the incidents.

Four days later, two suspects in the attempted break-in at Nikolov's apartment admitted that the raid on his home had been coordinated with a person claiming connections to the SBU. On 5 February, Bihus.Info published the results of its own investigation into the surveillance of its journalists: based on CCTV footage, some of the perpetrators were identified as SBU officers. On 31 January, the president dismissed Roman Semenchenko, the director of one of the departments to whom these officers reported. The SBU head Vasyl Malyuk took responsibility for the scandal, explaining that the officers had been conducting operations to expose individuals in possession of or distributing drugs, but they had not been authorised to publish the surveillance materials.

Commentary

- The scandal has unmasked the potential political exploitation of the Security Service of Ukraine. Almost everyone in Ukrainian journalism shares the opinion that the officers were tasked with discrediting critics of the president and his associates, and the attack on Bihus.Info is viewed as an attempt to undermine the credibility of independent

journalists in retaliation for their exposé. The SBU reports directly to the president, and one of the deputy chiefs of the Presidential Office, Oleh Tatarov, has significant influence over the tasks assigned to it.

- The remedial measures taken by the government have not stifled the criticism of the SBU or the speculations regarding the real objectives of its operations. Malyuk has not made clear why it was one of the SBU's departments, rather than the police, that was tasked with prosecuting drug traffickers. The recent developments prove that corrupt practices persist within the SBU which allow it to become involved in legally dubious operations. They also corroborate the need for a thorough reform of the SBU, involving the creation of an effective counterintelligence service that would (albeit to a limited extent) deal with internal affairs, including the prosecution of economic or criminal offenses. Kyiv's Western partners, including the USA, the EU and the International Monetary Fund, have been demanding such reforms for years.

- The Bihus.Info case and the attempt to intimidate Nikolov suggest that Zelensky's inner circle is concerned about the independence of media outlets that pose a challenge to the Presidential Office's information policy. They fear that publications critical of the authorities could further erode trust in the president. These incidents have sparked a wave of criticism from journalists against Zelensky as they complain about government pressure increasingly frequently. The incidents have also provided a convenient occasion for the opposition to attack Zelensky, as they have been able to present themselves as defenders of freedom of speech and accuse the president of increasingly undemocratic governance.