

Arrests in Zakarpattia and the suspension of Ukrainian–Hungarian talks

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On 9 May, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) announced the exposure of two agents – former soldiers of the Ukrainian army who had allegedly been recruited by Hungarian military intelligence. They were reportedly engaged in espionage activities in Zakarpattia, a region inhabited by several tens of thousands of ethnic Hungarians. Both individuals were detained and charged with high treason, an offence punishable by life imprisonment. Their alleged mission was reportedly to gather information on military facilities and equipment in the region, identify weaknesses in its defences, and monitor the political sentiment of the local population, including potential reactions in the event of an incursion by ‘Hungarian peacekeeping forces’. According to the SBU, Hungarian intelligence was also seeking to obtain data from the front line, including information on losses sustained by the Ukrainian armed forces.

Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó described the SBU’s claims as ‘anti-Hungarian propaganda from Kyiv’, and Budapest responded immediately by expelling two Ukrainian embassy staff members accused of engaging in intelligence activities. In retaliation, Kyiv expelled two Hungarian diplomats, to which Budapest responded with the ostentatious detention and deportation of a former Ukrainian embassy employee accused of espionage. Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Heorhiy Tykhyi referred to Hungary’s actions as a ‘witch hunt’ and accused the Hungarian authorities of anti-Ukrainian hysteria. On 11 May, Hungarian Deputy Foreign Minister Levente Magyar cancelled the intergovernmental consultations scheduled for the following day in Uzhhorod, which were intended to address Budapest’s concerns regarding Kyiv’s policy towards the Hungarian minority. The meeting had been scheduled following Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna’s visit to Budapest on 29 April. On 13 May, Viktor Orbán accused the TISZA party – the main opposition force in Hungary – of involvement in the Ukrainian counterintelligence operation.

The exposure of Hungarian espionage activity in Zakarpattia appears to be a response to Budapest’s obstruction of Ukraine’s European integration. Faced with dwindling hopes of breaking this deadlock, Kyiv’s objective may be to exert additional pressure in bilateral talks and to encourage EU member states to apply further influence on Hungary. If the Ukrainian intelligence service’s allegations are confirmed through legal proceedings, they are likely to lead to a further erosion of trust in Budapest within both the EU and NATO. Heightened tensions with Kyiv may, in fact, benefit the Hungarian government domestically, as they align with its ongoing anti-Ukrainian campaign.

Commentary

- **The exposure of Hungarian espionage activity in Ukraine is an unprecedented move that escalates tensions with a neighbouring country.** Although Kyiv has refrained from commenting on the matter at a senior level, the SBU's operation may be aimed at discrediting Hungary in the eyes of EU partners and mobilising them to find a solution that would allow Budapest's veto to be circumvented during the vote on opening the first negotiation cluster (see '[Cluster, open up! Ukraine's opportunities and risks on the road to the EU](#)'). Hungary has blocked such a solution since February (see '[Hungary hardens its stance on Ukraine](#)') and the ongoing discussion within the EU regarding the decoupling of the integration processes of Ukraine and Moldova, which until now have been treated as a package, provides a significant new context for these developments. Notably, Budapest does not oppose Moldova's progress. Kyiv's calculations may also have been reinforced by signals from Brussels, including from European Commission Vice-President Kaja Kallas, who has expressed a willingness to pursue alternative measures should a compromise not be reached and Hungary maintain its veto.
- **The arrest on the eve of the consultations in Uzhhorod may suggest Ukraine's lack of confidence in its ability to persuade its neighbour to withdraw its objection.** Through this move, Kyiv seeks to demonstrate that Budapest's recent actions are yet another indication of its deviation from Western unity on the issue of Ukraine (see '[Orbán's blackmail: Hungary threatens to block Ukraine's integration with the EU](#)'). Moreover, the nature of the information being gathered in the country (Hungarian intelligence activity in an ethnically diverse area that for centuries belonged to the Hungarian crown, which appears probable) is interpreted as probing the ground for potential hostile actions by Budapest in the region. At the same time, the SBU's report concerning attempts to obtain data from the front line raises suspicions regarding the possible utility of such information to Russia.
- **The anti-Ukrainian campaign is a central theme in the Hungarian government's narrative, and Kyiv's recent actions may ultimately play to Budapest's advantage.** The Hungarian authorities currently portray Ukraine's potential accession to the EU as the greatest threat to national interests and accuse Kyiv of persecuting the Hungarian minority in Zakarpattia. Prime Minister Orbán's government also uses anti-Ukrainian rhetoric to target the opposition, accusing it of supporting Ukraine's position regarding the war and its EU ambitions. Péter Magyar, Orbán's rival in the spring 2026 parliamentary election, has so far avoided addressing the issue of Ukraine. Orbán is attempting to impose a narrative suggesting that the actions of the SBU and the opposition are somehow coordinated, thereby enabling him to deflect attention from recent damaging revelations made by Magyar. One day before the exposure of Hungarian agents, Magyar released a recording from April 2023 in which Defence Minister Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky stated during a closed internal meeting that the government was 'breaking with the mentality of peace' and creating armed forces 'ready to fight'. While the precise meaning of these remarks remains unclear, the opposition has accused the government of hypocrisy, as such statements contradict the authorities' official 'peaceful' stance.