

SBU versus HUR: conflict between Ukraine's security services

Krzysztof Nieczypor

On 3 September, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced the dismissal of deputy heads of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (HUR). The decision came in response to an incident in Kyiv in which SBU officers used firearms against HUR personnel. The confrontation stemmed from SBU action targeting Stepan Kaplunov, deputy commander of the Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC), which operates under HUR structures.

On 23 August, the SBU reportedly detained and subsequently interrogated him over alleged contacts with Russian intelligence services. He was alleged to have been tasked by the FSB with preparing the assassination of a Russian opposition figure (according to media reports, Akhmed Zakayev, a representative of the unrecognised Chechen Republic of Ichkeria). During a search of Kaplunov's flat on 2 September, SBU officers opened fire on HUR soldiers who had arrived at the scene to support their comrade. Three of them were wounded in the incident, one seriously. Kaplunov himself was released from custody without charge. The following day, the SBU published a recording in which he confessed to the acts of which he had been accused. His alleged correspondence with Russian intelligence services was also made public. In a media interview, however, Kaplunov stated that he had been interrogated personally by acting SBU head Oleksandr Poklad and that his confession had been coerced. Moreover, the alleged aim was to discredit Kyrylo Budanov, head of the Presidential Office (PO), who until January this year headed HUR and was responsible for establishing and developing the RVC.

The incident highlights the escalating conflict between the SBU and HUR. The immediate cause of the confrontation between the two services is most likely the rivalry between Poklad and Budanov, a result of President Zelensky's inconsistent personnel policy over the past year. Zelensky now seeks to position himself as an impartial arbiter.

Commentary

- **The SBU's operation against HUR most likely represents an attempt to discredit Budanov.** Political motives are evident in the SBU's unlawful actions, such as Kaplunov's abduction and detention without an arrest warrant, and its repeated use, in similar cases, of allegations of collaboration with Russia. The current acting head of the SBU is regarded as ruthless, yet loyal to Zelensky. At the president's behest, Poklad reportedly coordinated the agency's actions against the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine

(NABU) in July 2025 and has sought to expand his influence within the security and intelligence services, including HUR. These efforts are reportedly supported by the current head of military intelligence, Oleh Ivashchenko, who was appointed by the president in January this year and has been removing individuals linked to his predecessor from their posts. Relations between Poklad and Budanov are further strained by the SBU's allegedly accidental killing in March 2022 of Denys Kireyev, a HUR staff member who took part in the first round of negotiations with Russia, held in Belarus in late February.

- **It cannot be ruled out that the SBU is acting with President Zelensky's knowledge as he seeks to curb the influence and popularity of the former head of HUR.** Budanov makes no secret of his political ambitions while seeking to retain his authority within HUR, particularly among special units such as the RVC. He is highly regarded by HUR personnel and the public, ranking third in Ukrainians' trust in public figures (61%), behind General Valerii Zaluzhnyi and Mykhailo Fedorov, but ahead of Zelensky.
- **Another reason for the conflict between the services may be President Zelensky's gradual loss of control over them.** This has been facilitated by recent changes in the leadership of both agencies, which have resulted in serious problems with coordination between them. As their remits expand and converge (particularly in the field of internal security, including counter-intelligence and special operations) and personal networks of loyalty increasingly overlap, the two services are becoming progressively more difficult to control and less subject to civilian oversight by state institutions.
- **HUR's defence of Kaplunov and the SBU officers' use of firearms in response indicate growing demoralisation and criminalisation of at least some elements within both agencies.** In recent months, individuals linked to Ukraine's intelligence and security services have been implicated in organising contract killings, including of businessmen who coordinated the activities of fraudulent call centres (see ['Ukraine: criminal group within the Prosecutor General's Office'](#)). The high public esteem for both services and their role in the fight against the Russian occupiers reinforce a sense of exceptionalism and impunity among their personnel.
- **Public outrage prompted Zelensky to try to defuse the scandal.** To limit reputational damage and deny Russia propaganda gains, he distanced himself from the affair and temporarily contained the dispute by dismissing the deputy heads of both services. However, it cannot be ruled out that the conflict could be exploited in the future. The disclosure of new evidence of alleged cooperation between HUR personnel and Russian intelligence services could enable Zelensky to publicly discredit Budanov if his growing popularity were to threaten the incumbent president's prospects of re-election.