

SBU stirs domestic and international tension

EVENT

On 18 July, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko announced he would run in the January presidential elections, but his use of the Security Service in his campaign threatens political stability.

When Yushchenko announced he would stand for re-election in an 18 July ceremony on Ukraine's highest peak, Hoverla, it was members of the Ukrainian Security Services (Sluzhba bezpeky ukrayiny: SBU) who stood behind the president and unveiled a large Ukrainian flag.

With Yushchenko's popularity at an all time low of three per cent, he is counting on using the SBU, which comes under the constitutional authority of the executive, to assist his re-election bid. However, the president's use of the organisation as his personal security service is both domestically destabilising and harmful to Kiev's relations with [Russia](#).

Spying scandal

In Ukraine, the president has been accused of using the SBU to undertake surveillance of perceived opponents. In March, Renat Kuzmin, deputy prosecutor, claimed he had been placed under illegal surveillance over the course of 2008 by the SBU. According to government sources, tensions had developed between Yushchenko and Kuzmin, as the president had become frustrated by a lack of progress in the investigation into his September 2004 dioxin poisoning.

The SBU's eavesdropping on the senior prosecutor was organised by deputy SBU head Tyberiy Durdynets. A Kiev court issued a warrant for Durdynets' arrest for allegedly illegally organising the eavesdropping but he fled [Ukraine](#) before he was arrested. On 19 May he was placed on Interpol's wanted list.

Participation by senior presidential staff and SBU officers in illegal eavesdropping also appears to have been undertaken with the involvement of members of the judiciary, who gave legal sanction. For instance, Anton Chernushenko, head of Kiev's appeals court, is being investigated by the prosecutors' office for providing illegal sanction for eavesdropping.

Information collected by a special parliamentary committee set up in April revealed the SBU had also eavesdropped on Ukrainian politicians, as well as the prosecutor's office. Those placed under surveillance included opposition and ruling coalition parliamentary deputies, as well as government ministers including Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. Last year the presidential secretariat ordered the SBU to investigate Tymoshenko's alleged "treason" after she had sought better relations with [Russia](#) shortly after the August 2008 conflict in [Georgia](#). In March the SBU stated the case had been closed after no evidence of treason had been found.

Such politically motivated moves come at a time of intense political rivalry in [Ukraine](#) ahead of the January 2010 presidential elections. The country has been effectively paralysed by political infighting over the past three years, with parliament virtually unable to act at a time when the country is facing a severe economic crisis. The activities of the SBU are only likely to deepen divisions, particular between Yushchenko and his erstwhile ally Tymoshenko.

Bear baiting

Another controversial aspect to the president's use of the SBU is in unveiling Soviet-era crimes. The SBU has selectively opened KGB archives on repressions and was ordered by the president to open criminal investigations into the 1933 famine in [Ukraine](#) that is estimated to have claimed between three and five million lives. Yushchenko's claim that the famine's victims numbered ten million, his international campaign to depict the famine as genocide and his attempt to prosecute those involved have been met with strong condemnation from Moscow.

The SBU's actions in the Crimea region of [Ukraine](#) have also stoked tensions with [Russia](#). Perhaps the most significant of these is the SBU's moves to stop [Russia](#) distributing passports to sections of the Crimean population. Kiev believes this could provide a pretext for [Russia](#) to intervene in defence of Russian citizens (as it did when it took on Georgian forces in South Ossetia in August 2008) if [Ukraine](#) takes action against Crimean separatists, as the SBU is increasingly doing.

The SBU has also ordered the Russian Federal Security Service (Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti: FSB) to vacate the Black Sea Fleet's base in Sevastopol by December. The SBU has formed its own detail to provide security for the fleet, fearing the FSB was involved in subversive activities, such as recruiting Ukrainians and providing logistical support to separatists and pro-Russian organisations in Sevastopol and the wider Crimea.

Finally, the SBU has increased its efforts to curtail the Black Sea Fleet's actions. On 8 July, Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior special forces, acted on intelligence provided by the SBU to intercept a Russian convoy transporting SS-N-9 anti-ship missiles through Sevastopol to a repair base 20 miles from the port, forcing it to turn back. During the August 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict, Yushchenko issued two decrees ordering the Black Sea Fleet to provide advance notice of its movements in and out of Sevastopol, much to Moscow's chagrin.

FORECAST

Yushchenko is likely to increasingly come to rely on the SBU's domestic and foreign activities throughout the election campaign, raising the risk of further domestic instability during a period of severe economic crisis, while further harming Ukraine's already poor relations with Russia at a time when a new gas supply crisis appears increasingly likely.



*President Viktor Yushchenko gestures while speaking at his news conference in Kiev, Ukraine. (PA)
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