

SBU Targets Opposition in Ukraine

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Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich

There is mounting evidence that the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has returned to tactics targeting the opposition last employed under President, Leonid Kuchma. It should be borne in mind that these tactics were never entirely abandoned. The SBU's domestic political role has remained because of the lack of democratic oversight, large numbers of personnel, primarily focused on domestic "threats" (30,000 SBU personnel compared to a combined figure of 6,000 in the UK's MI5 and MI6) and a Soviet political culture that was never rooted out. A final factor is the temptation of Ukrainian presidents to use the SBU against their political and business opponents.

The SBU's tactics can be divided into several categories with much of the pre-emption drawing on lessons learnt from mistakes made by the authorities in 2004 when the opposition and Orange Revolution thwarted a fraudulent election to place Viktor Yanukovich in power. First, intervention in the media with the aim of portraying the opposition in a negative light, and the authorities positively. SBU Chairman and oligarch, Valeriy Khoroshkovsky, owns Ukraine's most popular television channel, Inter. Khoroshkovsky is reportedly aligned with the gas lobby that is influential within the Party of Regions and other political forces.

Journalists are threatened with visits by SBU officers or placing them under surveillance (Ukrayinska Pravda, July 22). The blogger, Oleh Shynkarenko, was intimidated by the SBU after they claimed he had "threatened" the president's life. Shynkarenko claimed he was forced to sign an affidavit "As concrete demands were not made to myself, then I understood that any type of criticism of the authorities in my live blog could bring about new repression against myself" (Ukrayinska Pravda, July 30). Shynkarenko claimed the SBU had hacked into his website and deleted blog entries. His case could be related to the "assassination-phobia" that surrounds President Yanukovich (EDM, June 28). Andriy Shevchenko, deputy head of the parliamentary committee on freedom of speech, condemned the SBU for over-stepping its competencies (Komersant-Ukraina, August 2).

Western foundations based in Ukraine are also targeted by the SBU. Nico Lange, who since 2007, has been Ukraine director of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, was detained for ten hours in Kyiv's Borispol airport on June 26. Stiftung has worked in Ukraine since 1994 and is linked to Germany's Christian Democratic Party. Lange was threatened with deportation, but permitted to enter Ukraine after high level intervention by Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Afterwards both sides agreed, ahead of Yanukovich's late August visit to Germany, to downplay the incident by declaring it a "misunderstanding."

An investigation by the Prosecutor-General's office, following a request from the former President Leonid Kravchuk, found grounds for his detention. The report claims Lange violated Ukrainian legislation pertaining to foreigners living in Ukraine; namely, the "responsibility of foreign citizens to not intervene in affairs that lie within the competence of our state" (Ukrayinska Pravda, July 30). What this implies for other Western foundations and media operating in Ukraine is unclear. In 2003-2004, the Party of Regions,

other pro-Kuchma centrist parties and the communists, established a parliamentary commission to investigate Western funding of NGO's. The authorities delayed permitting the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to open a Kyiv office and threatened Radio Liberty with the closure of its Kyiv office in retaliation for broadcasts of excerpts from Major Mykola Melnychenko's (former presidential bodyguard) tapes made illicitly in 1999-2000 in Kuchma's office.

The conspiracy mindset of Western intelligence agencies being behind democratic revolutions in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine was as deep amongst this Ukrainian political constituency as it was in Russia, although only in the latter was anti-NGO legislation introduced in April 2006. This political culture rests on Soviet ideological tirades against dissidents and nationalists who were seen as not home grown but agents of outside intelligence agencies. Some of this draws upon latent anti-Americanism mobilized in the 2004 elections against Viktor Yushchenko. Former Defence Minister, Anatoliy Grytsenko, revealed that countering the activities of the US intelligence services in Ukraine has become the top priority of the counterintelligence department of the SBU. Meanwhile, the number of SBU officers focusing on the activities of the Russian special services in Ukraine has been cut by 25 percent (Kommersant-Ukraina, June 4).

Moreover, the SBU targets students and academics as potential supporters of the opposition (Ukrayinska Pravda, June 17). The first indication of this was a visit by an SBU officer to Father Borys Guzdiak, Dean of Lviv's Ukrainian Catholic University, asking him to assist them in ensuring that students did not attend political rallies and become politicized (<http://ucu.edu.ua/eng/news/549/>). Similar SBU visits have taken place in other universities, where academics have been more forthcoming in signing pledges to prevent their students from becoming involved in opposition activities. FEMEN women's student activists, who have become notorious for bearing their breasts to obtain public attention, have been threatened with expulsion from Universities (Ukrayinska Pravda, June 23, 30).

On July 7, the government issued Decree No. 1353-r, which officially transferred the Kyiv Mohyla Academy (KMA) and National University of Ostroh Academy, Ukraine's two oldest universities, under the education ministry (<http://www.brama.com/news/press/2010/07/100715ukma.html>). The KMA was one of the centers of the Orange Revolution and press center for the 2004 Yushchenko election campaign. Governors have been instructed to collect intelligence on businessmen for the SBU (see leaked document in Ukrayinska Pravda, July 26). The intelligence pertained to their education, profession, party loyalties and who they supported in the 2010 elections. The authorities are also interested in their "willingness to cooperate" which is indicated by a "+," "o" or "-" placed in their files. The SBU and interior ministry jointly employ tactics to prevent opposition supporters travelling to Kyiv or attending protests in Kyiv and other regions (EDM, June 22).

Finally, the SBU wants to neutralize Yulia Tymoshenko, who heads the largest opposition political force, but has no parliamentary seat. Former SBU Deputy Chairman, Oleksandr Skipalsky, said that the SBU seeks to "destroy her force ahead of local and future elections so that this political force would no longer exist" (Ukrayinska Pravda, July 27). Arrests of the former deputy head of Naftohaz Ukrainy, Ihor Didenko, former head of State Customs, Anatoliy Makarenko, and Taras Shepitko, with Maria Kushnir on a wanted list, are likely to be followed by others.

The SBU's tactics, in the view of former Foreign Minister, Borys Tarasiuk, exceed those employed against the opposition in the Kuchma era (Ukrayinska Pravda, June 26). The signal they send is both one of seeking revenge and of staying in power for the long term.