

Drones Over the Kremlin: Is Ukraine Trying to Assassinate Putin?

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On May 3, two slow moving drones flew over the Kremlin and then exploded in flames when the Russian military forced them down. Whether the drone attack was a serious attempt on Russian President Vladimir Putin's life or not, Moscow perceived it as one, [announcing](#) that "Last night, the Kiev regime attempted a drone strike against the residence of the President of the Russian Federation at the Kremlin. . . . We view these actions as a planned terrorist attack and an assassination attempt targeting the President."

Western officials were quick to dismiss the dramatic event as a drama event, suggesting that it was likely a Russian false flag operation. Ukraine, for its part, denied any involvement. Mykhailo Podolyak, an advisor to Zelensky, [called](#) the operation "predictable" and insisted that "Ukraine wages an exclusively defensive war and does not attack targets on the territory of the Russian Federation." He then said the event occurred "definitely without Ukraine's drones over the Kremlin." Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky [said](#) categorically, "We don't attack Putin or Moscow. We fight on our territory. We are defending our villages and cities."

But US intelligence now says that that is not true. The attack was not a Russian performance: the denials were a Ukrainian performance. Three weeks after the attack, *The New York Times* has [reported](#) that US intelligence agencies now believe that the drone attack was carried out by "one of Ukraine's special military or intelligence units."

US intelligence bases its assessment on communication intercepts that reveal Russian surprise at the attack and the findings of Moscow's preliminary investigations that blame Ukraine as well as Ukrainian communications that reveal a belief that it was Ukraine.

The intelligence agencies say it is "unclear whether President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine or his top officials were aware of the operation, though some officials believe Mr. Zelensky was not." But it seems questionable that such a significant and consequential act

would be carried out by Ukraine's military or intelligence with no high level approval or awareness. American officials suspect that Zelensky may not have specific awareness in advance because "Mr. Zelensky and his top aides have set the broad parameters of the covert campaign, leaving decisions about who and what to target to the security services and their operatives. In doing so, Mr. Zelensky and his top aides can deny knowing about them." US intelligence rates its confidence that the Ukrainian government "directly authorized the Kremlin drone attack" as "low" "because intelligence agencies do not yet have specific evidence identifying which government officials, Ukrainian units or operatives were involved."

The US assessment that Ukraine is responsible for the drone attack on the Kremlin and, more critically, the Russian assessment that it was could have three critical consequences.

The UK has recently provided Ukraine with long range Storm Shadow cruise missiles with a range sufficient to reach deep into Russian held territory, including Crimea. The US has recently authorized supplying Ukraine with F-16 fighter-bombers that have the capacity to strike deep inside internationally recognized Russian territory.

The Ukrainian government has [given](#) the UK "assurances . . . that these missiles will be used only within Ukrainian sovereign territory and not inside Russia." US President Joe Biden [says](#) that he has received "flat assurances" from Zelensky that F-16's won't be used inside Russian territory. Ukraine has [long promised](#) "not to target Russian territory with weapons provided by the West."

But Western confidence in these assurances has surely been deflated by the drone attacks over the Kremlin in Moscow. The attack demonstrates a willingness to strike in the heart of Russia. And it is not an anomaly. In May alone, Ukraine has used drones to [attack](#) a military training ground and an oil refinery in Russian territory. In December, Ukraine carried out two attacks on Russia's Engels air base.

US assessments that Zelensky may lack awareness of these drone attacks and that he has kept his promise not to use US supplied weapons to strike inside Russia must also surely have been shaken by comments by Zelensky captured by US intelligence in electronic intercepts. In February, Zelensky was [heard to complain](#) to General Valery Zaluzhny, his top commander, that Ukraine "does not have long-range missiles capable of reaching Russian troop deployments in Russia". On May 13, *The Washington Post* [reported](#), based on intercepted internal digital communications, that in January, Zelensky suggested that Ukraine "conduct strikes in Russia." In February, Zelensky suggested to Zaluzhny that "Ukraine attack unspecified deployment locations in Rostov," in western Russia, using drones.

The second consequence is the danger that these attacks could provoke Russia to escalate and that, since the weapons are supplied by the US - not to mention that Moscow [believes](#) that the decision to carry out these attacks is made in Washington - it increases the risk that the US could get drawn into the war.

The recent wave of drone attacks "have made officials in the United States . . . uncomfortable," according to the *Times*, precisely because of this danger. "The Biden administration is concerned about the risk that Russia will blame U.S. officials and retaliate by expanding the war beyond Ukraine."

And there is a third concern created by the Russian statement in reply to the attack on the Kremlin that it “reserves the right to take countermeasures wherever and whenever it deems appropriate.”

In the early days of the war, Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was attempting to mediate between Russia and Ukraine. In response to Zelensky’s fear that Russia would assassinate him, Bennett [says](#) he received a promise from Putin that “I won’t kill Zelensky.”

But, to Russia, the drone attack demonstrates that that promise is not reciprocal. It demonstrates a willingness to assassinate Putin. And it is not the only evidence. In what the *Kyiv Post* calls “an incredibly frank interview,” the deputy head of Ukraine’s Main Intelligence Directorate, Vadym Skibitsky, “bluntly [admitted](#) to plans to assassinate President Putin.” “We are getting closer and closer,” he said.

Further evidence comes from the head of Ukraine’s Main Intelligence Directorate and Skibitsky’s boss, Major General Kyrylo Budanov, who, while not discussing Putin directly, [admitted](#) that Ukraine was responsible for a number of assassinations of prominent Russians. “We’ve already successfully targeted quite a few people,” he said. “There have been well-publicized cases everyone knows about, thanks to the media coverage.” Budanov [said](#) in an interview that “we’ve been killing Russians and we will keep killing Russians anywhere on the face of this world until the complete victory of Ukraine.”

The lack of reciprocity on the promise not to kill Zelensky may have canceled the promise. That is the third possible consequence. “How would Americans react if a drone hit the White House?” Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov [asked](#). “The answer is obvious for any politician as well as for the average citizen: the punishment would be harsh and inevitable.” How harsh? “After today’s terrorist attack, there are no options left except for the physical elimination of Zelensky and his clique,” Former Russian President and current Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia Dmitry Medvedev [said](#). His choice of reactions was seconded by the Speaker of the Russian parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, who [said](#), “An attack on the president is an attack on Russia. There can be no negotiations. We will demand the use of weapons that are capable of stopping and destroying the Kyiv terrorist regime.”

The drone attack inside Russian territory, believed by Russia to be an attempted assassination on Putin and assessed by US intelligence to likely be a Ukrainian operation, accomplished little. But it has undoubtedly deflated Washington’s trust in Zelensky’s promise not to use US supplied weapons to strike inside Russia. It has also increased the danger of escalating the war, of drawing the US into the war and of attempts on Zelensky’s life in return.

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