

Power Struggle Rages in Ukraine: Head of Intelligence (GUR) Budanov's Wife, Other Officials Poisoned. Former Spy Chief

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The wife of the head of Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) of the Ministry of Defence Kyrylo Budanov, Marianna Budanova, was poisoned along with several other GUR employees, said Andriy Yusov, a spokesperson of Ukraine's GUR military intelligence directorate. Her poisoning is likely the latest event in the deepening power struggle in the Kiev regime.

According to Ukrainian media outlets, Budanova was hospitalised after being poisoned with heavy metals, most likely via food, and is now being treated. RBC Ukraine noted that it is unknown whether this was a "one-time poisoning" or "they poisoned her in portions for some time."

"During the tests, metals such as arsenic and mercury were discovered [...] This affected not only Kyrylo Budanov's wife directly, but also several employees of the Main Intelligence Directorate," the former head of the Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service Valeriy Kondratyuk said on NV radio.

"We are talking," continued Konratyuk, "about high-ranking officials, heads of individual areas responsible for operations against Russia."

During the summer, Yusov said that Budanov survived more than a dozen assassination attempts. The head of the Main Intelligence Directorate stated that his wife lives with him in his office, and they are together 24/7 for safety reasons. At the same time, Budanova does not work at the State Traffic Inspectorate, and since June 2021, she has held the position of adviser to the mayor of Kiev, Vitali Klitschko.

All this may indicate an intensification of behind-the-scenes fighting within the Ukrainian top leadership. There are deep contradictions between President Volodymyr Zelensky, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valerii Zaluzhny and Budanov. Their differences have been well reported on, including in Western media, revolving around how to proceed with the war effort.

The disagreement between the president and the commander-in-chief began in October when Zaluzhny indicated that the military operation was about to end. Zelensky disagreed, insisting that Ukrainian troops are capable of winning. The military leader's recent public acknowledgment that Moscow is in an advantageous position in the conflict has added tension. Rumours about the dismissals of senior military personnel, including him, were confirmed by Defence Minister Rustem Umerov.

Amid the tensions, reports emerged that in the March 2024 elections, Zaluzhny could run for president against the current president of Ukraine. Although the commander has not yet expressed such an intention, Zelensky is concerned about a possible loss of support.

Most telling and further consolidating the idea that the poisoning was orchestrated from within Kiev and not Moscow is that Russia has not been blamed for the assassination attempt, as usually happens in such situations. It is quite evident that the string of poisonings is part of Zelensky's attempt to consolidate his power, especially after taking the much-criticised decision to cancel the country's presidential elections scheduled for March 2024.

A recent poll found Budanov has better ratings than the president, enjoying +45%. The same poll, The Economist reported, suggests that Zelensky risks losing a presidential election if he ever goes head-to-head with Zaluzhny. Under such conditions, it is not difficult to see why Zelensky would want Budanov and Zaluzhny either killed or stripped of their power.

It is recalled that the vice-chairman of the Ukrainian Parliament's Committee for Security, Defence and Intelligence, Maryana Bezuglaya, had previously openly demanded the resignation of Zaluzhny, citing inadequacy in carrying out his duties as a military leader. Bezuglaya's criticism of the commander-in-chief has only escalated recently, raising questions about whether this is a personal vendetta or is being said on orders from Zelensky.

Since November 26, Bezuglaya has harshly criticised Zaluzhny on his social media, alleging the lack of a strategic plan for 2024 and accusing him of transferring responsibilities to the presidential office in uncomfortable situations. Her statements received criticism from Ukrainian society, which accused her of undermining confidence in the country's military.

According to the Ukrainian website Strana, the decision on the consequences of Bezuglaya's statements will be taken by Zelensky's close circle and his chief of staff, Andriy Yermak. So far, neither the president nor his advisors have reacted to the incident. Despite Bezuglaya denying coordination with the presidency, there is speculation in Ukrainian society that her words could be the start of a campaign to discredit the military leadership, indicating a possible dismissal of Zaluzhny by Zelensky.

It is unlikely that these incidents are happening in isolation. The string of murder attempts, calls for resignation, cancelling of elections, character assassinations and much more point

to a major power struggle in Kiev. The poisoning of Budanova is likely the latest event in this power struggle, but it certainly will not be the last.

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