

From the Shadows to the Social Sphere: Ukraine's Strategy of Engagement

Description

Conventional wisdom suggests intelligence services should maintain [a discreet profile](#) to avoid drawing undue attention to the secretive nature of their work. However, [Intelligence Laboratory Express](#), a Russian journal focused on intelligence studies, recently spotlighted Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR) as an exception. It portrayed HUR as "notably visible in the media," alleging that its operations are "primarily aimed at achieving media success" with "evident propaganda elements."

Despite the Russian narrative aiming to disparage HUR, the Ukrainian agency's actions reveal a nuanced truth. Diverging markedly from traditional intelligence practices, HUR has not only stepped out of the shadows but has also embraced transparency through active engagement on social media platforms like Facebook, X, Telegram, and Viber. Under the leadership of Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov, who enjoys [an almost cult status](#) among Ukrainians, HUR has adeptly used its public presence to personalize the conflict, highlight humanitarian operations, and effectively crowdsource support for defense initiatives against the Russian invasion.

Intelligence agencies considering a more transparent, public-facing approach like Ukraine's HUR must evaluate their specific operational environments, organizational cultures, and target audience dynamics. The HUR's tactics have been successful in Ukraine's existential conflict, boosting public support and morale under Budanov's charismatic leadership. However, this approach may not suit less acute or covert operations, where it could compromise sensitive activities. The agency's leadership and culture must support transparency, and the public must be receptive to such outreach. In [societies with low institutional trust](#), these tactics could backfire, being seen as propaganda rather than genuine engagement. Examining the HUR's forward-leaning methods will provide deeper insights into their potential applications and limitations during times of war.

Social Media and Public Engagement: From Facebook to MMA Fights

The evolution and operational dynamics of HUR reflect its strategic adaptation and involvement in both conventional and irregular warfare. Following Ukraine's independence in 1991, the HUR was officially integrated into the Ministry of Defense in 1993 after the unification of the Military Strategic Intelligence Directorate and the Intelligence Directorate. This signaled the start of a [comprehensive](#)

[approach](#) to national defense and intelligence operations, mirroring the wider post-Soviet shift in Ukraine's defense policy. The HUR consequently exemplifies a fusion of intelligence-gathering and special forces capabilities that enables it to play an extensive role in the country's defense architecture.

Since 2015, the HUR's role within Ukrainian society has notably intensified, propelled by its deployment of extensive social media campaigns on six different platforms (see Figure 1). These initiatives go beyond mere information dissemination: they are concerted efforts [to counter adversarial narratives](#) and keep the Ukrainian public informed about ongoing developments in territories under Russian occupation.

image

Figure 1: The number of HUR account followers on social media platforms.

An innovative facet of the HUR's engagement strategy via social media is the deployment of the [Main Intelligence Bot](#), a Telegram bot conceived to leverage the vigilance of the Ukrainian populace for intelligence-gathering efforts. This initiative converts ordinary citizens into active participants, empowering them to contribute actionable intelligence directly. The HUR reports that over the past two years since the full-scale invasion, the bot has yielded significant [operational success](#). Contributions from Ukrainians have led to the destruction of enemy warehouses, equipment, and naval assets, and have provided critical information on the whereabouts of high-ranking officials and collaborators.

A significant portion of HUR's social media content highlights successful operations against Russian forces, especially the exploits of various special forces units operating under HUR command like Group 13, Artan, and Timur. These units have garnered attention for their achievements, such as Group 13's recent destruction of three Russian naval vessels in the Black Sea: the corvette Ivanovets on February 1, 2024, the amphibious landing ship Tzezar Kunikov on February 14, and the patrol ship Sergei Kotov on March 5. The HUR publicized all [three attacks on its social media channels](#), in which Group 13 used Magura V maritime drones. It also shared footage from the onboard cameras of the attacking Unmanned Surface Vehicles (USVs). Exacerbating the situation for the Russians, the attacks on these ships were not only filmed and subsequently posted online, but the HUR also managed to confirm its success by [intercepting and publicly sharing communications](#) of Russian navy personnel discussing the sinking of these ships. Without hesitation, the HUR posted these sensitive intercepts online and, in doing so, has challenged traditional views that intelligence services should [prioritize the protection](#) of their collection assets.

In addition to posting operational reports on social media, the HUR also commemorates fallen personnel with the hashtag #HURremembers to underscore their bravery, resilience, and perseverance. One poignant example from November 2023 is a [eulogy for Andriy Yankeev Yaremchuk](#), whose ultimate sacrifice in the battle for his country's freedom exemplifies the utmost patriotism and courageous leadership. His commitment, reflected in his return from the French Legion to defend Ukraine, inspires a legacy of bravery and selflessness. Over a two-year period, the HUR posted messages with the hashtag #HURremembers 26 times, often highlighting the deep connection between the fallen and their local communities. These messages not only commemorate the past deeds of fallen HUR soldiers but also acknowledge the support they received from their families while serving in the HUR.

This theme of civil society support is frequently addressed in the HUR's social media messaging. This includes posts about renowned Ukrainian music groups creating tributes to the military intelligence service. For instance, [Monoton Music Label](#) produced an uplifting song, to the heroes from the HUR MO, expressing gratitude for their valor. Additionally, to demonstrate its approachability and desire to foster connections with the public, the HUR organized a [drawing contest](#) for Ukrainian children coinciding with the organization's 31st anniversary. The contest aimed to nurture artistic talents, provide an outlet for children's creative capacities, and instill patriotism a sentiment the HUR echoed on its social platforms with pictures of the children's artistic contributions.

Moreover, the HUR actively hosts and participates in events such as mixed martial arts competitions, which bolster its visibility and aid in recruiting for its special forces. It also marks its presence at key cultural occasions like the [Frankfurt Book Fair](#). At the 2023 fair, author Artem Shevchenko showcased his work *Military Intelligence of Ukraine: In the Sky, On the Sea, On the Ground*, which chronicles the HUR's special missions. The book, which has drawn interest from German media, literary critics, and security experts, is published in both Ukrainian and English. It provides a deep dive into the strategic planning and implementation of missions, along with firsthand accounts from those involved, underscoring the HUR's resistance against the Russian invasion.

The HUR's outreach extends beyond cultural contributions to include humanitarian acts. One of the HUR's special forces units known as Kraken has collaborated multiple times with the Humanitarian Center of Kharkiv Oblast relief missions (see Figure 2).

image

Figure 2: Volunteers and operators of the HUR's Kraken special forces unit deliver supplies to civilians. The photo is a screenshot from the HUR's Telegram channel.

The HUR reported on its social media channels that during the final months of 2023 these joint efforts led to the distribution of [humanitarian aid to approximately 2,000 inhabitants](#) of several liberated villages within the Kharkiv and Donetsk regions. Essential provisions such as food kits, medicines, and medical supplies were disseminated, targeting specifically a medical center and hospital in the noted areas. This initiative is just one of many instances where HUR units have directly assisted the civilian population with their needs.

Crowdsourcing Equipment

Despite actively participating in humanitarian relief efforts, HUR units depend on the public for crowdsourcing their specialized equipment. Since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, the HUR has been bolstered by substantial financial contributions and material donations that have been vital for their sustained operations and for the families of fallen soldiers.

This relationship is illustrated by the musicians of Dance on the Congo Square, who raised over 1.8 million hryvnias (approximately \$46,000 USD) to [support the children of fallen intelligence officers](#). The initiative, as part of a larger charity tour across 22 European cities, also raised funds for FPV drones that enhance the capabilities of the HUR's Shaman special forces unit on the battlefield. Similarly, the band Botashe collected 306 thousand hryvnias (approximately \$7,815 USD) during the Lviv music festival. These funds were earmarked for [the care of injured members](#) of the Timur special unit and the Special Operations Center Alfa Group of the internal security service SBU. These acts of philanthropy extend to tangible goods, with the members of Antitila providing [five thousand tactical NATO-standard first aid kits](#) to frontline soldiers.

The HUR has also improved its operational capabilities through substantial donations and support, which have included both financial contributions and specialized equipment. These contributions have come from various semi-professional crowdfunding organizations and initiatives, reflecting a robust partnership between the military and civil society designed to bolster Ukraine's defense against Russian aggression. For example, the Come Back Alive fund [provided HUR scouts](#) with thirteen new pickup trucks worth 15 million hryvnias (\$353,000 USD). Additionally, the Polish volunteer initiative, [Zbroimy Ukraine \(Arm Ukraine\)](#), donated a medevac helicopter equipped with modern medical tools, allowing the HUR to offer rapid medical assistance to evacuees from the frontline.

Further illustrating this collaboration, a [charity auction in Dnipro](#) organized by the non-governmental organization Strength of Hearts, raised 11 million hryvnias (\$281,000 USD approximately) for combat vehicles. Similarly, the [Serhiy Prytula Foundation](#) donated two tactical UAVs, purchased for about 11,6 million hryvnias (approximately \$294,000 USD), enhancing the HUR's reconnaissance capabilities. These examples underscore the crucial role of both civilian and international support in augmenting the

HUR's capabilities and showcase the close collaboration between Ukraine's military intelligence service and the civilian community.

Budanov: Bridging the HUR-Civil Society Divide

Lastly, the personal influence of HUR commander Budanov is a significant factor in the interplay between the HUR and civil society. Budanov leads with a philosophy that a spy boss cannot merely operate from the shadows. This approach was on display in mid-February 2024, when under Budanov's direction, the HUR released a video that merged digital culture with military recruitment. The video features a young person in a hoodie immersed in a first-person shooter game. During the game, a user named [Kyrylo86](#) contacts him via an on-screen chat. The young player is then shown footage of spectacular attacks by the HUR against Russian targets. The climax of the video occurs when Kyrylo86 types: "we need your skills," offering the young man a position at the HUR. As the camera zooms out, the viewer is presented with a scene of [@ChiefDI_Ukraine](#) Budanov sitting behind his desk, personally recruiting much-needed IT-savvy personnel.

This creative strategy underlines Budanov's [cult status among Ukrainians](#), as evidenced by the widespread sharing of memes featuring his likeness, especially following military setbacks in Russia or Russian-controlled regions. The HUR's [engaging and adept use of social media](#) starkly contrasts with the Russian Federation's less effective propaganda, which is often seen as heavy-handed and less trustworthy. This contrast not only highlights the HUR's successful engagement with the digital generation but also amplifies [Budanov's popularity](#) and the broader cultural resonance of the HUR's digital outreach efforts.

After polling both experts and readers in October 2022, The New Voice of Ukraine newspaper identified Kyrylo Budanov as one of [the most influential military leaders in Ukraine](#). Due to the war, the site clarified that its list of personalities was not arranged in order of popularity. Nonetheless, The New Voice placed Budanov—referred to as the man [without a smile](#)—at the forefront of its list, ahead of former Commander-in-Chief General Valery Zaluzhnyi and former Minister of Defense Oleksiy Reznikov. This recognition signifies Budanov's broad influence within not just the military domain but also civilian and government circles, and in doing so, presents him as a central figure in Ukraine's defense. His visibility and acclaim underscore a unique relationship where public sentiment and military leadership intertwine.

The HUR and Participatory Warfare

The HUR's approach to social media engagement, in which it builds relations with civil society initiatives and supports Lieutenant-General Budanov's leadership, transcends the traditional bounds

of a military intelligence service and therefore challenges conservative views on public engagement.

A 2022 article [by Gregory Asmolov](#) explores the role of digital media in contemporary conflicts, with a particular emphasis on the Russo-Ukrainian war. Asmolov analyzes the ways in which digital platforms have introduced new avenues for participatory warfare, enabling a broader spectrum of individuals to become involved in the conflict. His analysis highlights the crucial role of narratives in mobilizing support and shaping public perception.

Asmolov argues that Ukraine's population is aware of Ukraine's limited statehood and acknowledges [the need for full societal mobilization](#) to counter Russia's invasion. As a result, Asmolov's work offers a valuable perspective on the HUR's innovative strategies, underscoring the significance of digital mobilization and narrative construction in influencing the outcomes of modern conflicts.

Nevertheless, the approach of the HUR is not without controversy. Specifically, the active involvement of civilians in wartime intelligence collection on enemy troops is the subject of heated debate within Western military institutions. Critics argue that it may infringe upon the humanitarian rules of war by blurring the lines between combatants and non-combatants. Despite these debates, the communication between the HUR and the Ukrainian public continues unabated, at least for the foreseeable future.

Concluding Remarks

The HUR engages with civil society through a multifaceted approach that incorporates social media, collaboration with crowdsourcing organizations, and the public profile of its commander, Lieutenant General Kyrilo Budanov. This strategy aligns with Gregory Asmolov's recent insights regarding the role of digital media in modern conflicts. Social media platforms can extend participation beyond traditional military roles. Even amidst the hardships of war, the Ukrainian people have [demonstrated remarkable resilience](#) and an eagerness to support their nation's defense, through diverse acts of civil resistance and the backing of their military forces. The HUR's use of social media for information dissemination, narrative construction, and public engagement, along with its interactions with crowdsourcing initiatives, reflects an adaptation to contemporary warfare. Moreover, Lieutenant General Budanov demonstrates how leadership plays a significant role in shaping public perception and mobilization that transcends more conventional forms of intelligence communication.

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Main Image: Kyrylo Budanov in his office. (Ukrainian government via Wikimedia)

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