

PUTIN'S ASSASSINS POISONED MY WIFE

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EXCLUSIVE

From Lord Ashcroft in Kyiv

As the war enters its fourth bloody year, Ukraine's spy chief tells Lord Ashcroft Russia is facing imminent economic collapse... and reveals the terrifying reason the conflict has become so personal for his family

HE IS a decorated war hero, the survivor of numerous assassination attempts and the head of Ukraine's defence intelligence service. Few men have given more blood, sweat and tears towards Ukraine's war effort against Russia than Lieutenant General Kyrulo Budanov.

While some men of his age – he recently entered his 40th year – have been fighting Russians for three years since the all-out invasion of February 24, 2022, General Budanov has been at the forefront of the war effort for over a decade.

This is because, after Russia's illegal incursions into Crimea and other areas of eastern Ukraine in 2014, he took part in several daring operations behind enemy lines in the Donbas, being wounded several times. At that point, he was a member of the elite "Unit 2245" of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate, which is believed to have been trained by America's CIA (Central Intelligence Agency).

General Budanov's hatred of Russian aggression against his beloved country is all the more personal given Vladimir Putin's agents poisoned his wife, Marianna, at the end of 2023, requiring her to receive hospital treatment. It has never emerged publicly how this was done other than "heavy metals" were used to harm her.

In an exclusive interview at a secret location they call "The Island" in Ukrainian capital Kyiv, General Budanov tells me: "It was a brutal attempt [on her life]. My wife has had a long recovery and several complications following that, even recently. But God was with us and we will be all right."

Now, as Marianna continues her recovery, General Budanov's energies are concentrated on the war effort. Ukraine has endured yet another deeply challenging week as it marked the third anniversary of the all-out invasion by Russia.



SECRET LOCATION: Kyiv's intelligence boss meets Lord Ashcroft

never started" the war, prompting global criticism of his comments.

The US president partly withdrew those remarks at the weekend, acknowledging Ukraine had been invaded on the orders of President Putin.

General Budanov, who last year became the recipient of Ukraine's premier bravery award, "Hero of Ukraine" – likened to Britain and the Commonwealth's Victoria Cross – gave me his assessment of the war.

"The situation on the Ukrainian battlefield is difficult but under control," he said. "The Russians are advancing, and they have a tactical advantage, but certainly not a strategic one."

When it comes to newly emerging methods of war, particularly aerial and sea drone warfare, General Budanov believes Ukraine

maintains an edge. "In terms of drone technology, both in quality and quantity, we are ahead," he said. "But Russia was always ahead of the rest of the world in electronic warfare, and they still are."

Western innovative technology could help level the playing field, but he is cautious that one or two systems will not make a difference. "The Russians have deeply integrated, multilayered tools of electronic warfare that range from tactical to strategic depths, even systems that can block the satellite communications over 5,000 kilometres [3,125 miles]."

Asked about recent Ukrainian operations on Russian soil, notably into Kursk, he remained measured. "That question is best addressed to the armed forces," he says. "But I think the initial objectives of the operation were achieved."

Russia's war machine is still running but

General Budanov believes it is straining under pressure.

"Their military production peaked last year," he reveals. "They are now focusing on increasing their capabilities in aerial glide bombs and drone arsenal but they can't do it without external support."

That support, he says, is coming primarily from North Korea. "It is safe to say that North Korea supplies about half of Russia's total arsenal today," he states.

He believes Moscow's current build-up is purely focused on sustaining the war with Ukraine.

"Both Ukraine and Russia have by now exhausted all the Soviet-era stockpiles we had," he adds.

And what about Russia's economic future? General Budanov has a stark prediction: in the middle of this year, their economy will collapse. "They are already feeling the burden of it. The country spending over 40% of their budget on military expenditure cannot

sustain its functioning. By summer, the situation will reach its peak," he said.

It is widely suggested that a return to pre-2014 borders would be impossible.

"That may be someone's personal opinion," he told me. "But Ukraine will continue to stand by the principle of fully restoring its territorial integrity."

For most politicians and military leaders their biggest wish is that Russia publicly acknowledges Ukraine's right to sovereignty as the first step to ending the war. Any peace deal must then be supported by cast-iron "security guarantees" if, as seems increasingly likely, Ukraine is not granted NATO membership in the near future.

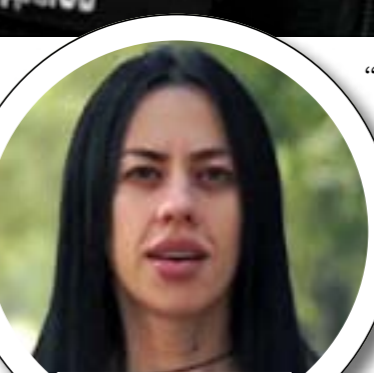
As for these "security guarantees", General Budanov drew an analogy with Taiwan. "Taiwan's security stems from its self-sufficiency," he tells me.

Then in a reference to Sir Winston Churchill – our wartime prime minister whom he hugely admires – the general says:

"Churchill once said that Britain's security relied on its Army and Navy. Ukraine must find its own guarantees."

THE Americans' meeting with the Russian delegation in Riyadh last week – without the representatives of Ukraine – was just the first stage of the peace process.

"Negotiations continue, and by definition they must include both sides of the conflict," the general continues. "You can't achieve anything by only speaking to one [side]."



RECOVERING: The general's poisoned wife, Marianna

General Budanov is equally wary of proposals for peacekeeping troops in Ukraine.

Despite the immense challenges he and his country face, General Budanov remains steadfast and committed to his country's

"There has never been an example in history where this has worked," he says.

"Perhaps, Ukraine will be the first one, but I doubt it."

The general continues to enjoy his reputation as someone who is a constant thorn in Russia's side.

When Moscow issued an arrest warrant against him after the 2022 attack on the Kerch Bridge in Crimea, he considered it to be a badge of honour. His defiant reaction was: "I am pleased. This is a good indicator of our work, and I promise to work even better."

General Budanov remains steadfast and committed to his country's

fight. "I am a military guy. This is my natural habitat," he says.

And what would he say to Putin, if given the chance?

He laughs: "You want me to deliver a message via the British audience? In the minds of Russians, Great Britain is already their biggest adversary. Maybe [your country is] not the best delivery system for that message!"

However, he and most Ukrainians remain grateful for British support, particularly at a time when US aid in future, under its new president, is far from guaranteed.

His message to us is simple: "Please keep standing with Ukraine, as this is the time when we may need your support the most. Stand by the values that both our nations hold, values worth making sacrifices for."

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. Visit lordashcroft.com and follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft