

Lessons from Montenegro: is a coup possible in Belarus?

On 6 November 2016 Milivoje Katnich, the Chief Special Prosecutor of Montenegro, gave a statement regarding the failed coup attempt in Podgorica during the Parliamentary elections on 16 October 2016.

According to him, several groups of Russian and Russian-backed Serbian nationalists were behind the coup; they were hoping to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO and the EU.

The fact that the Kremlin was able to plan such an operation in Montenegro leaves no doubts as to its capabilities to launch a similar plot in Belarus. Analysing last year's joint Belarusian and Russian military exercises, which were developed by the Russian General Staff, also arouses suspicions.

The case of Montenegro

Several groups of Russian and Serbian nationalists had planned to open fire on the pro-Russian opposition rally wearing Montenegrin police uniforms. The rally took place in front of the Parliament to protest against Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic. This ploy was intended to provoke massive bloodshed by assaulting the protesters near the Parliament. The plan also included the elimination of the prime minister, calling to mind the situation in Kiev during Maidan in February 2014.

Fortunately, Montenegrin and Serbian security services were able to prevent the coup attempt and arrest several participants. Meanwhile, Belgrade quietly deported several Russians suspected of coordinating the coup after Nikolai

Patrushev, the Head of the Russian Security Council, flew to Belgrade on 26 October 2016 in an apparent attempt to diffuse the scandal and evacuate his compatriots.

According to officials in Podgorica, the sabotage groups wanted to destabilise the political situation in the country and prevent Montenegro from further integrating with the EU and NATO. It is clear that Montenegro, along with other countries in the Balkan region aspiring to draw closer to the EU and NATO, are highly at risk of destabilisation.

The Kremlin's networks in Serbia and Belarus

According to our Serbian sources, pro-Russian forces are carrying out subversive activities in Serbia as well. Unfortunately, it seems that Belarusians are also involved in these plots.

Vencislav Buyich, director of the SEAS Foundation (Belgrade), stated in an interview that he had met with Sergey Lushch, a representative of the pro-Kremlin organisation "Rus molodaya" (Minsk), in Belgrade in Spring 2016. The latter apparently spoke quite openly about his plans to destabilise Serbia.

Specifically, Sergey Lushch spoke of the need to have his own people in every Serbian city with a population of over 20,000 people. The main task of these people and organisations would be to gain the trust of the locals, mostly through civic activities. These activists ought never to outwardly demonstrate their pro-Russian orientation, nor should they speak out publicly against pro-Western developments in the country.

Without a doubt, pro-Kremlin organisations are creating their own network of "sleeping agents"

Without a doubt, pro-Kremlin organisations are creating their own network of "sleeping agents". According to Sergei Lushch, at any given moment they could begin anti-Western uprisings in several countries. Unfortunately, the Kremlin has already proved the efficacy of this technique in Ukraine.

"Rus molodaya" is not a well-known or popular NGO in Belarus. Nevertheless, it does enjoy the support of the Russian Embassy in Minsk as well as "Rossotrudnichestvo", the Russian Federal Agency responsible for foreign "civilian aid". Certain Belarusian officials with explicitly pro-Kremlin views participate frequently in their events, one example is [Vadzim Hihin](#), former chief editor of the magazine *Belaruskaja Dumka*, a mouthpiece of the Presidential Administration.

The fact that the Kremlin has managed to involve Belarusians in destabilising activities in Serbia is deeply worrying. This proves that the Kremlin has been working to create a network of "agents" in Belarus as well. Several pro-Russian groups, such as the Cossacks and Orthodox organisations, have indeed become more active since the start of the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

The plan for Belarus

Unfortunately, like other post-Soviet states, Belarus is a hostage to the Kremlin's perception of international relations as a zero-sum game. It is clear from statements by Aliaksandr Lukashenka that the Belarusian leadership has no intention of normalising relations with the West at the expense of its strategic obligations to Russia or Eurasian integration. Despite this fact, the Kremlin persists in treating any hint of normalisation between the West and Belarus as a threat to its influence.

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troops to “stabilise the situation and restore the constitutional order” in Belarus

Some evidence points to the fact that Moscow has already developed a contingency plan for Belarus should it lose influence there. Last year, Belarusian and Russian joint military drills (“Interaction – 2015” and “Slavonic brotherhood – 2015”) demonstrated that Russia is preparing for a possible destabilisation of the military-political situation in Belarus. The Kremlin has also considered the possibility of deploying troops to “stabilise the situation and restore the constitutional order” in Belarus.

According to the scenario of these military drills, which were developed by the Russian General Staff, illegal irregular armed groups (far right radicals) destabilise the military and political situation in Belarus. They practise capturing critical state and military facilities, eliminating political and military leadership, carrying out terrorist attacks, and provoking protests.

In the scenario, the Belarusian government is unable to stabilise the situation on its own and requests military help from the Kremlin. Moscow decides to send troops in to conduct a joint anti-terrorist operation, prevent unrest, and “restore constitutional order”. Incidentally, the 76th Air Assault Division of the Russian Armed Forces and recently deployed mechanised brigades, which are stationed close to the Belarusian border, are very well suited for such hypothetical anti-terrorist operations.

Obviously, such a scenario is a clear exaggeration of the real internal and external situation in Belarus. Such drills, along with a Kremlin-backed media campaign attempting to convey the possibility of Belarus becoming a “russophobic” state, are seemingly intended to prepare the Russian population for a possible crisis with Belarus. Propaganda featuring similar rhetoric could also be seen before and during the conflict

between Russia and Ukraine.

Such assessments by military and civilian analysts illustrate the Kremlin's willingness to destabilise Belarus and take advantage of the ensuing disorder in order to project its military power, rather than improving the security situation.

The Montenegrin case also demonstrates how easily the Kremlin can initiate a coup with the help of sabotage groups

The Montenegrin case also demonstrates how easily the Kremlin can initiate a coup with the help of sabotage groups (potentially even disguised as Belarusian nationalists) and subversive tactics. Given the Kremlin's influence on Belarusian security services, the bureaucracy apparatus, and even certain NGOs and oppositional groups, it could certainly pull off such a coup in Belarus.

Consequences and implications

Without doubt, the ultimate goal of such destabilisation and military power projection would be a regime change resulting in fully pro-Kremlin political leadership in Minsk. Moscow needs to be sure that it has full access to the territory of Belarus in the case of a large-scale military conflict with NATO.

Theoretically, Moscow intends to transform Belarus into a Cold War outpost in order to generate conventional and hybrid threats to NATO member states and Ukraine. This remains difficult to accomplish as long as the Belarusian state is strong and Aliaksandr Lukashenka attempts to maintain neutrality by refusing to host Russian military bases on Belarusian territory.

Belarus needs to expect increasing pressure from the Kremlin, which wants to gain more political and military control in the

near future. However, if Aliaksandr Lukashenka resists such pressure, a coup remains a highly likely scenario in Belarus-Russia relations.

The upcoming meeting between Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in the coming month will be indicative of further developments. Belarus Digest will be monitoring them closely.

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