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Assessment of tomorrow

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Putin's outsourcing of Belarus - a deal that Lukashenko could not refuse

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko can scarcely be recognised as a winner in the resolution of the military rebellion in Russia over the weekend. Rather, as a blackmailed debtor whose creditor suddenly appeared at his door to collect his instalment.

A mere two public appearances by Lukashenko and his patron Vladimir Putin were enough to dispel numerous hasty comments about Lukashenko's mediating role in the intra-Russian conflict and the benefits he would derive from it.

Last Tuesday, Putin described in more detail the deal with Yevgeny Prigozhin and his mercenaries from the Wagner Group, saying that the participants in the rebellion had two options.

The first option was to join the regular Russian forces and continue fighting or option two, which was to join their owner and commander, Prigozhin, in Belarus, where he had already been exiled.

According to the Kremlin, signing the contract with the Ministry of Defence has been an act of mercy towards the coup plotters and the only completely legal option.

Going to Belarus means voluntary exile without guarantees of a safe future.

Lukashenko's mediation at the behest of the Kremlin

Using his characteristic street slang, Lukashenko confirmed that in the dramatic hours that rocked Russia last Saturday, he did not choose to be mediator between Putin and Prigozhin, but that the Russian president asked him to do so.

Putin tried to talk to Prigozhin, who was already moving towards Moscow with the troops, but the head of the Wagner Group did not answer his phone.

Prigozhin's communication with Lukashenko was where the appeal (or request) for mediation came from the Kremlin to Minsk.

In solving the most serious security crisis during his 23-year rule, Putin chose the option of directing the rebels to Belarus for several reasons.

Putting out the fire in panic

AI first, he was in a panic. Then, he knew that Lukashenko could not refuse such a request.

The Belarusian autocrat is too beholden to the Russian leader, politically, security-wise and financially, to dare to say "nyet".

Also, Lukashenko absolutely does not need any destabilisation of the situation in Russia, particularly endangering the position of Vladimir Putin.

The protection deals that Belarus has with Russia are the result of an agreement between the two leaders, which is why Lukashenko would have a potentially significant problem in the event of a coup in Moscow.

That is why the option of moving the cause of the crisis from Russia to Belarus was similar to putting out the fire in panic and buying precious time for the consolidation of the defence of the Russian leader.

Putin simply outsourced Belarus to solve his internal crisis, not caring much about whether Belarus agreed or perhaps had some

conditions.

Unwanted guests, not consultants

Lukashenko's explanation that Belarus will benefit from unwanted guests as consultants in the use of modern weapons (primarily drones), was unconvincing.

Because at the same time, he said that he would not allow the Wagner Group to recruit fighters in Belarus. He pointed out that "we will keep a close eye on them", and that the accommodation he offered them in an abandoned military base "has a fence".

Lukashenko will have the least say about the exiled members of the Wagner Group and what they will and will not do.

Just as he gave them refuge because Putin asked for it, any future decision on the treatment and engagement of the Wagner Group members will come from Moscow, not Minsk.

"Given the nature of Lukashenko's relationship with Putin, it's unlikely that Lukashenko will sanction Prigozhin-led activities in Belarus without Putin knowing about them, and approving of them. Putin might have dictated the terms to Lukashenko", said Kenneth Yalowitz, former US ambassador to Belarus.

Indispensable money

Putin's "rental" of Lukashenko's country to export the security problem also has strong financial motives, which the Russian leader briefly explained last Tuesday in a speech to members of the military in the Kremlin.

According to his calculations, the Wagner Group and its traitorous leader earned about $2 billion from the Russian state in the past year.

The Ministry of Defence paid about $1.1 billion for fighting in Ukraine, while Prigozhin's companies earned almost $1 billion for supplying the Russian army at the front.

By mentioning the money in front of the soldiers, Vladimir Putin wanted to turn the public against Wagner and Prigozhin, including the members of the army, whose salaries are half the monthly earnings of the Wagner Group members (about $3,000).

But it also showed his relief because overnight, he deleted one significant item from the war expenses.

After announcing that Yevgeny Prigozhin had arrived in Belarus, Lukashenko also said that the members of his private army would stay in Belarus at their own expense, but apart from his word, there was no confirmation that this would actually be the case.

It is much more likely that the costs of those exiled from Russia would be shouldered by the budget of Belarus, at least in part.

Lukashenko knows well that three years ago, he was in a similar situation as Putin is now, when large protests due to stolen presidential elections threatened his overthrowing.

Putin was the only one who came to his aid then, when he announced sending troops to Belarus, if necessary, and gave his vassal from Minsk $1.5 billion to consolidate his power.

That was the moment when Lukashenko accepted "an offer that cannot be refused", but at the same time took on a debt that he is still paying back.

Belarus is under permanent blackmail

Before the arrival of Prigozhin and his fighters, Lukashenko accepted that Russia deploys nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus, and before that, the Russian troops that entered Ukraine from his country last February, as if from a springboard.

Moscow was usually cynical towards the Belarusian leader regarding the arrangements for the reception of the rebels - "we are grateful to the Belarusian president for his efforts", said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov after the end of the crisis.

One Russian TV commentator even suggested that a "monument to Lukashenko should be raised in the best place in Moscow".

Both sides, however, know very well that this has been only a favour from one blackmailed autocrat to another when he was frantically looking for a way out of the biggest crisis of his rule.