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FSB Turns Paintball Games Into Military Coups

By Alexander Golts

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As is well known, tragic events often repeat as a farce. As the 20th anniversary of the attempted military coup of August 1991 approaches, journalists in Yekaterinburg reported that the Federal Security Service was able to avert a military rebellion.

The suspected organizers of the alleged coup attempt who were arrested in Yekaterinburg include a 65-year-old veteran of the Afghan War, a businessman and a retired criminal investigator. Their plot called for shock troops to start the rebellion on Aug. 2, when most police would be busy trying to keep Paratroopers Day celebrations from turning into inebriated fistfights and other displays of public disorder.

The rebels were to force their way into the Yekaterinburg offices of the Federal Security Service, the Emergency Situations Ministry and the Interior Ministry and kill the top officials there. Next, they planned to blow up several electricity stations and shut down power to the city.

Once panic would have spread throughout the city, the rebels were to seize local weapons depots and distribute machine guns to men young and old. That, they hoped, would trigger a chain reaction of similar revolts across Russia, allowing the rebels to ultimately seize power in Moscow and set up a military dictatorship.

Investigators suspect that the plotters are linked to retired special forces Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, who is currently in prison on charges of attempting to organize a previous armed rebellion.

One year ago, officials arrested Pyotr Galkin in the woods outside the city of Vladimir, 200 kilometers east of Moscow. He is the head of the Tolyatti branch of Kvachkov's organization, the People's Militia. Galkin, who was found armed with a crossbow, was trying to recruit 500 former military personnel, also armed with crossbows, in the Vladimir region. His strategy was to seize the missile and artillery arsenal located in Vladimir and, along with the Kovrov tank division, advance toward Moscow.

Not even the world's most talented fiction writer could dream up such a plot. It resembles a Russian version of Norway's Anders Breivik — that is, one crazy man against the world. Why would the murder of siloviki officials and an electrical blackout in an isolated Ural city spark panic across Russia? And why would citizens side with the rebels?

The whole thing smacks of a setup. After failing to curb terrorism in the North Caucasus, this might have been a desperate attempt by FSB operatives to show the Kremlin that they are vigilant and competent in protecting the motherland against serious threats to national security. Or it might be a preventative measure following a December protest by retired paratroopers. It is inconceivable, however, that anyone in the Kremlin or White House would seriously believe that these misfits could have overthrown the government.

The most logical explanation of what really happened was given by one of the lawyers of the suspected mutineers. The "rebels" were not planning a military coup at all; they were only playing an elaborate game of paintball.

The most interesting aspect of this story is that the media and the public have remained largely indifferent toward it. A country that did experience a very real attempt at a military coup 20 years ago now shows little concern over the threat of a new one. As recently as 10 years ago, there was a passionate debate as to whether the military could interfere in political matters. In October 1993, when former Vice President Alexander Rutskoi was besieged in the White House, he called on the military to come to his aid. State Duma Defense Committee chairman General Lev Rokhlin issued instructions to unit commanders not to carry out orders from their commander in chief. At that time, the likelihood of a military coup was high, particularly considering that soldiers had not been paid in six months.

But by the late 1990s, this period of chaos and instability had thankfully passed and has been replaced by more than a decade of relative calm and self-restraint. Only Kvachkov and some of his followers still dream of military coups. Even during the run-up to State Duma and presidential elections, the authorities have no concerns about implementing sweeping, severe reforms to the military and Interior Ministry that have taken jobs away from more than 350,000 men between the ages of 30 and 40, most of whom have been trained to carry firearms. On first glance, this would seem to be a replication of the Weimar Republic, in which

hundreds of thousands of unemployed and embittered members of the police and armed forces were itching to avenge the government.

But Russia is much calmer and more stable than Weimar was. The reason for the current calm is a certain sense of complacency. The plethora of oil dollars has allowed the government to promise laid-off military personnel benefits — above all, free housing — and some have actually received these benefits. What's more, fired siloviki have little trouble finding work in the private sector. The demand for private security firms has grown rapidly over the past decade if for no other reason than because the police are too incompetent and corrupt to do their jobs properly. Finally, to distract (and entertain) the discontent, the government employs the boisterous Vladimir Zhirinovsky, head of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, who has been specially trained to combine nationalism and superpower ambitions with servility before the authorities.

But the most important factor ensuring stability is that the siloviki who are most angry have no real leaders to fight for their interests. Senior military officers have become remarkably well integrated into Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's power vertical. All of them are quite wealthy, and their wives, children and relatives have become adept at using their connections to build lucrative businesses. If any of them do bicker with the government, it is only regarding the size of the piece of the pie they have been allowed to grab. These people, sitting comfortably at the top of the siloviki structure, are the pillars of support for the ruling regime. The last thing they are thinking about is rebelling against the hand that feeds them so well.

So let Kvachkov and his occasional follower dart about the woods with their crossbows, playing their paintball games. The only threat to the existing regime is if oil drops below $100 per barrel.

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