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How Belarus Could Become Part of Russia

By Richard Lourie

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Sept. 11, 2001, was a failure not only of intelligence but also of imagination. No one had even conceived that terrorists could seize airplanes and fly them into buildings. So after the attacks, the Pentagon and CIA hired screenwriters to advise on the construction of worst-case scenarios.

In that spirit, let's play with Belarus, the country that President Vladimir Putin made a point of visiting first after his ill-starred inauguration in early May. A nation of some 9.6 million people, Belarus is often termed the last dictatorship in Europe. Notably, its secret police are still called the KGB.

The scenario opens with real events, cinematic enough in themselves. Earlier this year, a Swedish ad agency, Studio Total, chartered a small plane, violated Belarussian airspace and bombarded the capital, Minsk, with some 800 teddy bears equipped with parachutes and adorned with human rights slogans like "Free Speech Now."

In a rage, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko fired the generals in charge of the air force and border guards as well as his foreign minister. Sweden's ambassador was expelled, and Stockholm retaliated with diplomatic expulsions of its own.

After reports that a student who posted images of the teddy bears online had been arrested, Studio Total's founder, Per Cromwell, wrote in an open letter to the Belarussian authorities, "If you absolutely must jail and abuse people, why not invite us?"

But would Stockholm, which has refused to say it would not extradite WikiLeaks leader Julian Assange to the United States if he returned to Sweden to face criminal charges, extradite the teddy-bear pranksters if Belarus brought charges against them?

Here the scenario clicks in. Teddy bears begin appearing everywhere in Belarus. Arrests increase. Protests become more common and more clever, designed to catch the eye of the world media. As the crackdown escalates, so do the number of atrocity videos on the web. Weapons are stolen from barracks and from injured riot policemen. Some soldiers defect. Armed resistance breaks out. The night is lit by fires from Molotov cocktails.

The Western press accuses political leaders of hypocrisy, willing to chase halfway around the world to oust dictators like Saddam Hussein and Moammar Gadhafi but unwilling to do more than issue sanctions against the tyranny in their own backyard.

Belarus appeals to its closest neighbor and ally, Russia, for help. Putin declares that Belarus was always historically part of Russia, having experienced only one year of independence in 1918-19. He moves to reincorporate it into Russia. Europe howls in outrage.

Putin is convinced that Belarus is just the beginning of a long, well-prepared Western plan to remove him from power and weaken Russia. Everything — the nongovernmental organizations, the teddy bears, the election monitors, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Pussy Riot, Mikhail Khodorkovsky — have been leading to this. Minsk is the stepping stone to Moscow.

That winter, Russia puts pressure on Europe by interrupting the flow of gas, blaming it on sabotage by "terrorists." In fact, there are now plenty of genuine terrorist acts in Russia, as arrests and show trials only increase popular resistance to Putin's regime. Chechen terrorists strike everywhere. Rumors spread about missing material from Russian nuclear installations. And the 2014 Winter Olympic Games are set to open in the southern city of Sochi in a matter of weeks.

Putin is backed into a corner. He picks up a special Kremlin emergency telephone. He knows only one person can save him now: super secret agent Anna Chapman. (Hey, it's a scenario, isn't it?)

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

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