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Putin Must Change Direction or Face a Coup

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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As the Ukrainian crisis intensified in recent months and after Western states imposed sanctions not only on Russia, but even on close associates of President Vladimir Putin, Moscow's ruling elite concluded that Washington and Brussels are intent on achieving a regime change in Russia.

However, not a single official of the United States or of any other Western country has made a statement to that effect. The fact that U.S. President Barack Obama has listed the Kremlin's policy toward Ukraine as one of the three main threats to international security does not necessarily mean that Washington is bent on toppling the Russian regime at any price — however much the sanctions might suggest otherwise.

What's more, the Russian and U.S. presidential administrations continue an intensive dialogue not only on Ukraine, but on a wide range of issues.

Nonetheless, in his annual speech before the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Foreign

Minister Sergei Lavrov said the main goal of the Western sanctions is regime change in Russia. Apparently, that is the only way the Kremlin chooses to interpret the actions of the West.

As if on cue, all of Russia's state-controlled television stations immediately rushed to prove that the U.S. and the West are fomenting a coup in Russia and that the job of everyone in the "Western camp" is to stir up discontent among the masses so that the Russian opposition can move in and channel that anger in the right direction.

Formerly the exclusive view of marginalized groups, Moscow latched onto this "conspiracy theory" and elevated it to official policy several years ago. That only raises even deeper doubts about the ability of Russia's leaders to grasp objective reality.

The phenomenon of regime change became well-known and subjected to thorough study following the 1968 release of the classic book by Edward Luttwak "Coup d'État: A Practical Handbook." Since then, many hundreds of coups have occurred in more than 100 countries. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Moldova and possibly Turkmenistan — owing to the mysterious death of former Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov — all suffered coups of some description.

Russia itself survived coup attempts in 1991 and 1993, as did Uzbekistan in 2005. Only Belarus and Kazakhstan have so far escaped coups and even attempted coups, but that is no guarantee for the future.

How justified are fears that the West really could accomplish a coup d'état in modern Russia — however unlikely it is that such a plan even exists?

Following World War II, no successful coup has occurred among any of the victorious powers or members of the nuclear club — that is, in the U.S., the Soviet Union/Russia, Britain, China, France or India. The only exception is Pakistan, although that country developed its nuclear weapon in response to India's nuclear program, and since 1999, Pakistan has had a democratically elected leadership and no further coups.

As Luttwak explained, coup d'états occur only in weak, unstable states and societies. By contrast, states are practically invulnerable to coups where power is distributed between multiple institutions and levels of government, there are active political parties, a strong and stable economy, a strong civil society, trade unions, associations, local authorities, leaders of public opinion and independent media, and there are fair

elections being held regularly.

By contrast, in countries where the population views the government as a separate and uncontrollable force such as the climate or the weather, where the authorities take little or no interest in the well-being of their fellow citizens, where there are weak institutions of civil society and leaders rely exclusively on the government bureaucracy and defense and law enforcement structures to maintain their hold on power, and where the economy suffers from chronic and long-term crisis — these are the states most vulnerable to a coup d'état.

In such societies, rebels need only seize the center of power in the capital to gain control over the bureaucracy — which generally cares little about who holds the reins — and the success of the coup is ensured.

According to Luttwak, three conditions must exist in a country with a strong government bureaucracy and a weak society in order for a coup to succeed. They are:

- an extended and serious economic collapse accompanied by massive unemployment and galloping inflation;

- a long and unsuccessful war, a major war or else a situation in which the ruling regime suffers a serious diplomatic defeat;

- chronic political instability and a multiparty system.

The fatal weakness of authoritarian regimes is that the more they suppress society and the more the narrow circle of rulers who head the bureaucracy and security forces wield arbitrary power, the more vulnerable that regime is to a potential coup because it becomes relatively easy to snatch away that power once it is concentrated in only a few hands. And it is all the easier when society and the government bureaucracy act as no more than passive onlookers.

If Putin and his team really want to reliably protect Russia against any attempt at a coup d'état — either from domestic or foreign forces — and to ensure the lasting sovereignty of the country, they need to actively promote the development of a strong civil society and democracy rather than suppressing them both.

They must also adopt effective economic policies that guarantee high employment levels and economic growth — as, for example, China has done — while at the same time avoiding dangerous foreign policy ventures. Recall that the war in Afghanistan hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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