

Russia's controversial ambassador in Minsk is dismissed

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On 30 April, Russia's president Vladimir Putin dismissed Mikhail Babich from the position of ambassador in Minsk and replaced him with Dmitry Mezentsev, a member of the upper house of the Russian parliament. Babich had acted in the capacity of special representative of the president of the Russian Federation for developing trade and economic relations with Belarus, which offered more extensive formal prerogatives; his successor will not continue this. Babich was nominated for this position in August 2018 and provoked serious reservations from the Belarusian government due to his rather aggressive rhetoric and activity far beyond diplomatic standards. This involved, for example: meetings with the Belarusian opposition, management staff of various levels, and law enforcement structures. His dismissal coincided with the detention of Andrei Vtyurin, the Deputy Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus, on charges of corruption with the involvement of a Russian citizen. This provoked media speculation that Babich had made attempts to lobby for Russian interests among a section of the Belarusian nomenklatura.

The replacement of the ambassador is a tactical concession from Moscow to Alyaksandr Lukashenka. However, it does not equate to a change in Russia's policy towards Belarus. Everything seems to suggest that the Kremlin will continue its pressure on Belarus. It cannot be ruled out that Russia, in connection with Babich's dismissal, has managed to force Minsk to make concessions on enhancing the integration of Belarus and Russia as part of the Union State.

Minsk's reservations towards Babich

Mikhail Babich was already viewed as a controversial figure in Belarus when he was presented as a candidate for ambassador in Minsk. The Belarusian government was concerned that the former officer of the Airborne Forces and a senior official without diplomatic experience who was specially trusted by President Putin would not be just another Russian ambassador but rather an immediate representative of the Kremlin attempting to push through Russian interests contrary to the Belarusian government's will. The fact that Babich was granted (for the first time in the history of Russian-Belarusian relations) the status of a special representative of the president of the Russian Federation for developing trade and economic relations with Belarus also raised suspicions in Minsk. Numerous publications in Belarusian independent media went so far as to call Babich a Russian 'viceroy', adding even more drama to the situation. This was one of the reasons why Lukashenka delayed granting his consent for this nomination.

Babich's activity after taking up the position only proved that the previous concerns were reasonable; both the Belarusian government and opposition circles were equally sceptical about him. His numerous statements that were confrontational and critical about Belarus, ostentatious inspections at strategic companies and meetings with representatives of the nomenklatura (including the Minister of Internal Affairs Ihar Shunevich) caused an escalation of tension. This was reflected in the unprecedentedly heated official comments from the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and also from President Lukashenka himself. Babich was in Minsk in the context of Russia increasing pressure on Belarus with the intention to push through real integration of the two countries as part of the Union State (which has formally existed since 1999). For this reason Babich, who has no diplomatic skills, was viewed in Belarus as the main executor of Russia's new diplomatic offensive. In effect, in the past few months Babich was in fact not trusted by the Belarusian government (without being officially recognised as a *persona non grata*), and Lukashenka (according to unofficial information) became personally engaged in efforts to bring about his dismissal.

A warning for the nomenklatura

On 29 April, a day before the Russian ambassador in Minsk was dismissed, the Belarusian media published information that two representatives of the Belarusian nomenklatura had been arrested on charges of corruption. On 4 May the KGB's press service confirmed that the detained officials were the Deputy Secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus, Andrei Vtyurin, and the director general of the telecommunication company Beltelecom, Sergey Sivodedov, while those who bribed them (US\$148,600 and €15,000, respectively) were Russian citizens. The special emphasis on the involvement of representatives of Russian firms in corruption was interpreted by the local media as proof that Russia, including ambassador Babich himself, had been making covert efforts to build influence among the Belarusian nomenklatura. Nor can it be ruled out that the bribes were offered by the representatives of Russian firms as part of an intentional operation aimed at discrediting influential members of the Belarusian elite. This especially concerns Vtyurin whose loyalty to the president had previously been unquestioned. Vtyurin, a graduate from the school of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation in Saratov had been in President Lukashenka's inner circle since 1995, initially as his bodyguard, security chief and, from 2007, the Chief of the President's Security Service. In 2014, he became one of the senior officials of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus. His detention proves that Lukashenka has interpreted the representatives of the nomenklatura's unofficial contacts with Russian officials as a manifestation of disloyalty that poses a threat to the stability of his regime. This needs to be viewed as a warning addressed to the Belarusian elites so that they remain cautious in contacts with Russian officials and businessmen.

A tactical concession from the Kremlin

The nomination of Dmitry Mezentsev for ambassador in Minsk will only mean a change in Russian interests are represented, and not a modification of the Kremlin's strategy. The new ambassador has previously served, as the Secretary General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the governor of Irkutsk Oblast, and as a senator. He originates from the group of Vladimir Putin's associates in the 1990s, when both of them worked for Saint

Petersburg's City Hall. This means that, like Babich, he is Putin's trusted and close official and will be engaged in intensive albeit certainly more balanced diplomatic activity in Minsk.

Even though the decision to dismiss Babich is beneficial for Minsk in terms of prestige, it is unclear what is really behind it. It cannot be ruled out that Russia has succeeded in forcing Belarus to make concessions concerning enhancing integration as part of the Union State (for example, introducing an effective single visa area) – which is currently Moscow's strategic goal with regard to Minsk. One indirect sign that concessions may have been made is the cancellation of Lukashenka's visit to Brussels on 13 May, which is supposed to serve as proof of his loyalty to Moscow.

Babich's successor will continue the same policy aimed at convincing Minsk to embark on real integration as part of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. The intentions of the Russian strategy were presented in public on 13 December 2018 by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who made the possibility of further subsidising the Belarusian economy dependent on the implementation of the integration scenario. The key elements of the Russian pressure include: the conditions of supplying gas starting from 2020, the access of Belarusian goods to the Russian market, compensation for the so-called 'tax manoeuvre' (changes in taxing Russian oil exports which adversely affect the Belarusian economy), the conditions of repaying the Russian loan on the construction of the Astravets nuclear power plant. The lack of progress in what Moscow views as priority areas will result in a reduction of subsidies. This would be a serious blow to the Belarusian economy.

Conclusion

Babich's dismissal from the position of ambassador in Minsk less than eight months after his nomination is certainly beneficial for Lukashenka. He has thus improved his credibility as the main protector of Belarusian sovereignty and as an effective negotiator in the increasingly complex contacts with Russia. This is especially important in the context of the loyalty of the Belarusian nomenklatura (some members of which harbour pro-Russian sentiments and are thus potentially receptive to Russian influence) on both the institutional and informal levels of contacts between the elites of the two countries. In turn, the dismissal of Andrei Vtyurin is an additional signal to strengthen the message that Alyaksandr Lukashenka still controls the government system and the domestic situation in Belarus.

There are no grounds to claim that the dismissal of Babich will entail an easing of Russian pressure (regarding energy, economic and financial issues) and a change in the Russian strategy towards Belarus. At the same time, many factors suggest that Lukashenka will remain Moscow's main political partner in Belarus and may probably count on its support in the upcoming presidential election (which will take place in spring 2020 at the earliest). However, most likely the price he will have to pay for this will be his consent to enhance integration with Russia as part of the Union State.