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Russia and Belarus accuse Poland of preparing aggressive plans

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On 21 July 2023, a meeting of the Security Council of the Russian Federation was held. One part of this meeting was publicised for propaganda purposes. Citing information obtained from "several intelligence sources", director of the Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin said that the government in Warsaw is slowly coming to the conclusion that Western assistance to Ukraine is ineffective and the defeat of Ukrainian forces is a matter of time. According to Naryshkin, the "Polish leadership" is planning to seize control of Ukraine's western regions by deploying Polish troops there. This allegedly would be carried out as part of a security initiative established by Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, which envisages the deployment of a Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian brigade which operates under the auspices of the so-called Lublin Triangle.

Vladimir Putin spoke in the same terms as Naryshkin, stating that representatives of the European elite have become aware that supporting Ukraine is a 'dead end' and a waste of money which only serves the interests of the US. According to Russia's president, the signals regarding the intention to boost the Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian brigade (which is to be deployed to carry out operations on the territory of Ukraine) indicate that it will de facto be responsible for the occupation of this territory. Putin said that Poland is counting on the establishment of a coalition under NATO's auspices and is hoping to be able to carry out a direct intervention in order to regain "its former territories" which now belong to Ukraine and also to Belarus. He emphasised that any act of aggression against Belarus will equate to an act of aggression against the Russian Federation which, in turn, will respond to it using "all measures at its disposal".

The Kremlin's anti-Polish narrative was backed by Alyaksandr Lukashenka who, during a meeting with Putin, held on 23 July in Saint Petersburg, said that "dismembering Ukraine and transferring a part of it to Poland is unacceptable". He added that, should the residents of western Ukraine need help, Belarus will help them "in any possible way". To highlight the alleged threat of an armed conflict with Poland, he announced that he had presented Putin with a map of Polish troop deployment on the western border of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. He stressed that one Polish brigade is currently stationed at a distance of 40 km from Brest, and another around 100 km from Hrodna. He also said that members of the Wagner Group who are in Belarus "insist" on making an armed sortie "to the West, a trip to Warsaw and Rzeszów". He added that sentiment among the mercenaries is negative. They are allegedly calling for revenge on Poland and view Rzeszów as a city through which weapons are transported to Ukraine. These weapons have contributed to major losses in

their ranks. He also said that, in line with his agreement with Putin, members of the Wagner Group are now deployed in the central part of Belarus and added that he “would not be willing to send them there”.

Commentary

- The Kremlin and Lukashenka stepping up their anti-Polish rhetoric is another instance of the escalation of psychological warfare and a disinformation operation intended to stoke domestic tension ahead of Poland’s parliamentary election by suggesting that Poland allegedly plans to launch a direct military confrontation with Belarus and Russia. One of Moscow’s important goals is to undermine the Western allies’ confidence in Warsaw. By suggesting that Poland is considering an armed conflict with Belarus and that it even intends to provoke it by concentrating its troops near its eastern border it is attempting to challenge Poland’s defence policy and present it as political adventurism. Moreover, Moscow’s attempts to display its willingness and ability to create threats to NATO states is intended to offset the view that Russia’s domestic situation has been seriously weakened as a result of Yevgeny Prigozhin’s mutiny. Russia also intends to test NATO’s resilience and the unity of its member states regarding the need to consistently strengthen its eastern flank.
- Putin’s emphasis on Poland’s alleged plans for seizing a portion of Ukraine’s territory is an element of disinformation activities intended to increase distrust of Poland on the part of Ukraine’s government and society (especially in Ukraine’s western oblasts). This is why the Russian narrative suggests that Warsaw, which has allegedly come to terms with the prospect of Ukraine’s defeat, will want to quickly recoup the costs of helping Ukraine which it has borne thus far, by making territorial gains. Russia’s attempts to accuse Poland of preparing similar plans regarding Belarus are intended to corroborate the Polish government’s imperialist ambitions.
- Lukashenka’s statements suggesting that the Wagner mercenaries are ready to make an armed sortie to Poland or western Ukraine are intended to highlight his own role in shaping the region’s security situation. Lukashenka has emphasised that he does control the mercenaries and at the same time suggested that their future deployment is uncertain. In the short term, Minsk will use the Wagner fighters as a bargaining chip in its talks with Moscow and as an element of scare tactics against the West in the situation of the mercenary units arriving in training grounds located near the borders with Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. Lukashenka is hoping to receive further financial benefits from Russia and to be able to introduce modifications to the mutual integration programmes which would be favourable to Belarus (this particularly refers to an increase in Russian energy subsidies).
- It is an open question whether the Wagner fighters will carry out a display of force targeting Poland, Lithuania or Ukraine in the immediate future. Although for the time being this scenario remains hypothetical, it is dangerous to Lukashenka himself because any incursion into the territory of Poland or Lithuania would de facto equate to an armed aggression against NATO. So far, Lukashenka has avoided becoming directly involved in Russia’s military activity. However, potential acts of sabotage carried out by the Wagner mercenaries targeting these states would be considered Russian military activity. This

would put him in a difficult situation and would undermine his authority in the Belarusian civilian elite and in higher ranking command structures in the Belarusian army and the state security institutions. Should Lukashenka approve of the Wagner fighters' sabotage activity or distance himself from it (which would equate to admitting that armed units not controlled by Minsk operate in Belarus) this would once again prove that he has lost the remnants of his independence in his relations with the Kremlin.

- At the same time, Moscow may hope that acts of provocation near the border (including the destruction of border infrastructure, the shelling of Polish territory) carried out by Wagner fighters would trigger debates within NATO regarding a possible military response to these acts, with some states and groups opting for far-reaching restraint motivated by their fear of an escalating conflict with Russia. In the Kremlin's vision, these debates would lead to tension between the allies. Therefore, it should be expected that Moscow will closely monitor both strategic communication on the part of Warsaw, Brussels and Washington, and the possible preventive measures which will be carried out in response to the current threats.