A catalyst coup

Erik Lenhart

Abstract

This article analyses the August Coup 1991. The author of the article argues that the coup was a key moment in evolution of USSR. The article examines the background of the coup. It shortly reviews the coup development. It analyses the reason of coup failure and the coup aftermath. The article examines how the coup failure contributed to the subsequent disintegration of USSR. The author considers the coup to be essential due to speeding up the disintegration process of USSR; He also identifies it as a point in which there was no way of turning back. The coup has cancelled the attempt of ZSSR political system consolidation. The author further analyses the political power transition from the central soviet authorities to the republics’ authorities.

Keywords: August Coup, Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), new union treaty, State Emergency Committee (GKChP), Declaration of the Soviet Leadership, dilemma of liberalizations

Introduction

In my research paper, I am going to investigate the August Coup 1991. There are several possible interpretations of the coup. From various models I’ve selected and combined the conservative model, constitutional model and the elite class model. The author of this paper
argues that the coup speeded up the process of decentralization and subsequent disintegration of the USSR. He further argues that the main impact of the coup led either to a disgrace or an elimination of the old central elites and strengthening of the old-new regional elites. This paper investigates the power transition and acceleration of this process due to coup attempt. That is the main reason why call it a catalyst coup.

1. Brief Coup attempt and aftermath overview

In August 1991 Soviet coup d'état attempt (August 19-22, 1991), also known as the August Putsch or August Coup happened. A group of the Soviet Union's government members briefly deposed Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev and attempted to take control of the country. The coup leaders were hard-line members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) who thought that Gorbachev's reform program had gone too far and that a new union treaty that he had negotiated handed over too much of the central government's power to the republics. The USSR KGB chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov asked two KGB officers to prepare a plan of measures which could be taken in case the state of emergency was declared in the USSR already in December 1990. Later Kryuchkov involved other USSR officials in the conspiracy. The conspirators hoped that the USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev could “be persuaded” to declare the state of emergency and to “restore order”. Their calculation wasn’t entire wrong according the circumstances. Firstly, Gorbachev had no own power base on his own. “He tried to ally with strongest faction without being its prisoner.”¹ Secondly I would like to mention Shevardnadze’s unanswered question, “How could president appoint people to his team who opposed to his policies?”² From this it is to conclude that either Gorbachev underestimated his opponents or his attempted to create a broad consensus for his policies by involving the opponents in the process or both. Thirdly Gorbachev’s decision on Baku in 1990³ might also lead them to conclusion that they might persuade him to join them.

Therefore the conspirators could calculate that if they grab the power Gorbachev might bless their actions, since if they were able to achieve their objectives, they anticipated he would have no other choice. On August 4, 1991 Gorbachev went on holiday to his dacha in Foros in the Crimea. He planned to return to Moscow on August 20, 1991 when the union treaty was to be signed. On August 17 the conspirators met in a KGB guesthouse in Moscow and decided that it was time to act. On August 18, the conspirators flew to negotiate with Gorbachev. The negotiation failed and conspirators put Gorbachev under house arrest. His dacha was guarded by KGB. After the return of from Crimea the conspirators met in the Kremlin. Gennady Yanayev, Valentin Pavlov and Oleg Baklanov signed the “Declaration of the Soviet Leadership”. In that they declared the state of emergency on unspecified territories of the USSR and announced that the State Emergency Committee (GKChP) was created to maintain the regime of state emergency. Gennady Yanev signed the decree naming himself as acting USSR president on the pretext of Gorbachev's inability to perform presidential duties due to “illness.” If we review the GKChP members it is clear that it was a coup attempt of the central soviet government, which tried not to lose power, against its pro-reformist president. The GKChP members were:

- Gennady Yanayev - Vice President of the Soviet Union (1990-91). The “acting president” during the coup attempt
- Valentin Pavlov - Prime Minister of the Soviet Union from January to August 1991
- Vladimir Kryuchkov - KGB Chairman
- Dimitry Yazov - Marshal of the Soviet Union
- Boris Pugo - Minister of the Interior Affairs of the USSR
- Oleg Baklanov - the deputy Chief of the USSR Defense Council
- Vasily Starodubstev, chairman of the USSR Peasant Union
- Alexander Tizyakov, president of the Association of the State Enterprises and Conglomerates of Industry, Transport, and Communications
On August 19th the GKChP broadcasted the Declaration of the Soviet Leadership. Four “most dangerous” Russian SFSR people’s deputies were arrested by KGB. The GKChP failed to arrest Boris Yeltsin, which turned out to be a fatal mistake. Boris Yeltsin arrived at the White House, (Russia’s parliament building) and asked military not to take a party on the coup. Acting president Gennady Yanayev declared the state of emergency in Moscow and expressed GKChP’s commitment to continue the reforms. There has been an unexpected situation when major Evdokimov, who was ordered to guard the White House, switched loyalty to Yeltsin. This was the second crack in GKChP plan.

Yeltsin climbed one of the tanks in front of the White House and addressed the crowd. Together with the Russian SFSR Prime Minister Ivan Silaev and the acting Chairman of Supreme Soviet of the Russian SFSR Ruslan Khasbulatov, they issued a declaration in which they proclaimed that a reactionary anti-constitutional coup had taken place. They called for general strike and demanded to let Mikhail Gorbachev speak.

On the next day General Kalinin, the commander of Moscow military district was preparing to storm the White House. In the afternoon of August 20 the putschists decided to storm the White House. The attempt to storm the White House wasn’t entirely bloodless. At about 1 A.M. not far from the White House a column of infantry fighting vehicles were blocked in a tunnel by barricades made of trolleybuses and street cleaning machines. There were casualties and three civilians Dmitriy Komar, Vladimir Usov and Ilya Krichevskiy were killed and several other civilians were wounded. The Alpha Group and the Vympel Group did not move to the White House as it had been planned. When Dimitry Yazov learned about this, he ordered the troops to pull out from Moscow. This moment was the turning point during the coup attempt. The fact that the GKChP realized that they couldn’t rely on military support meant that coup attempt was over. The moment when the army refuses to fight for the regime it falls. The whole structure has collapsed as a house of cards.

The GKChP members met in the Defense Ministry and, not knowing what to do, decided to send a delegation to the Crimea in order to meet with Mikhail Gorbachev for negotiations. Gorbachev decided not to meet them and deposed the GKChP representatives from their posts after means of communication were restored. Gorbachev might not be the

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brightest fellow; however, it was a logical assumption that there was no reason for the GKChP to negotiate with him, in case they would have been successful. They would have consolidated their position first. They would make some populists gests, would fill the GULAGs with their opponents and then call him back from Dacha to bless their actions. The USSR General Prosecutors Office started the investigation of the coup attempt.

The GKChP members were arrested with exception of Boris Pugo, who together with his wife committed suicide. Gorbachev restored his position, though his powers were fatally compromised. The coup speeded the process of disassemblment of the USSR. In early December 1991, Ukraine voted for independence from the Soviet Union. A week later, on December 8, Yeltsin met with Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevich in Belovezhskaya Pushcha. The three presidents announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union and their plan to establish a voluntary Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in its place. On December 24, the Russian Federation took the Soviet Union's seat in the United Nations. The next day, President Gorbachev resigned and the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

Boris Yeltsin was the true winner. His acting during the coup attempt gained him popularity and influence. Mikhail Gorbachev has also accused Yeltsin of violating the people's will expressed in the referendum in which the majority voted to keep the Soviet Union. The failed coup shifted power toward Boris Yeltsin who benefited from it the most. The putchists tried later to justify their actions. Mr. Yanayev said that, if they were successful, they could prevent violence in the former republics. I doubt it. The most authors agree that they could hold power two years at best and the disintegration would follow anyway. Secondly, there would be uprisings and strikes against their regime and it might have been even bloodier.

2. Coup attempt analysis

There were several reasons why the coup happened. I mentioned several. Now I would like to now elaborate my arguments further. As Norman Davies with a bit of sarcasm stated in his book Europe: A History: “In fact, it was not really a coup at all; it was the last twitch of dying
dinosaur’s tail. As Davis labels the GKChP members, these “dinosaurs” were the part of elite which was affected by the changes the most. They were losing their positions and weren’t able to transform in contrast to the New Russians – oligarchs who generated quite a fortune due to cracks in law. Besides of Alexander Tizyakov the other GKChP members were mainly part of repressive apparatus of the old regime and the post of the chairman of the USSR Peasant Union doesn’t sound very lucrative either. In case of Boris Pugo the situation was even more desperate. He was a Latvian and without the “Evil Empire” he could retire back to Latvia with no special prospect of a bright future. He bet on the USSR instead of the nationalism as Yeltsin did. There was other reason why these officials decided to act was - the new union treaty, which threatened to decentralize the USSR and shifted the power from the central authorities to the republics. There were several signals that the coup might happen earlier. It seems that coupist weren’t much of coherent group and they acted too late and too chaotic with little backing.

Professor Sakwa and general Odom both argue that Perestroika was actually no reconstruction but deconstruction and disintegration of Soviet structures. General Odom elaborates his argument deeper referring to Professor Huntington’s distinction between political development and decay. I agree that the Perestroika was no development but decay of USSR. It was disorderly attempt of the economy transformation and political system of the communist state which failed. The parallel liberalization and democratization was a way to bury not to resurrect the soviet system.

The communist ideology is internationalist. The CPSU restrained any sign of nationalism. With political liberalization these suppressed nationalisms in the Union came back to surface and after the coup it was as general Odom has written: “Saint Boris of Holy Russia facing Comrade Gorbachev of the Marxist Soviet Union.” The issue of nationalism occurred earlier and neither Gorbachev nor the GKChP knew how to face it.

The goal of the coupist was attempt to restore deteriorated USSR and reform it in a slower fashion. “Like Andropov, they were willing to rationalize the system, but, like conservative reformist Yegor Ligaschev, they believed that Gorbachev’s reforms were going too far.”

Why did the coup fail? Sloppy preparation and realization of the coup - This statement could describe the entire coup attempt. I am going to elaborate this statement in following key points:

- The GKChP was trying to do coup with an impression not doing. However they did it with fatal mistakes. The hard-liners tried to shield them with the USSR constitution – meaning that the President is unable to exercise his office and that they staged “the emergency due to his inability to run the office”. This justification has quite limited room for maneuver. The GKChP members have to either bring president back to power, (which they might intend to do,) by joining them to justify their actions; alternatively they needed to elect a new president who would bless their actions - neither happened. Mr. Yeltsin was more crude about the violating the Soviet Constitution. In his case he gained extra-constitutional legitimacy, which allowed him to act as he did.

- The inability to arrest or eliminate Yeltsin - The point is obvious. They should have captured him prior declaration of state emergency. This again proves my argument that they either underestimated nascent Russian nationalism, or they didn’t know how to face it.

- The Inability to secure military backing – this is a textbook mistake, if they weren’t sure of military backing the coup attempt was foolish at best. No coup ever was successful without backing of military or having own militia to back the coup.

- Insufficient media control - Since they weren’t able to secure media monopoly, Yeltsin was able to fully use the situation and make a tank to his speaker desk. With media monopoly this might be an isolated incident. Even if they would have had military support, they would have a general strike on their hands.

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8 Sakwa, R., A Cleansing Storm: The August Coup and the Triumph of Perestroika, in The Soviet Transition: from Gorbachev to Yeltsin, (p.140)
Inability to get Mikhail Gorbachev on board - After they lost the control over the military Gorbachev was the only person who could justify their actions. He evaluated the situation correctly and deposed the putschists, there was no reason for him to back a failing coup he didn’t participated in, moreover when GKChP put him under house arrest before.

Inability to gain public support by using popular slogans via unpopular means - the vague proclamation on “the streets of the cities will be purged of crime” and “genuine democratic processes” spoken by Yanayev whose hand were shaking – didn’t make clear impression to general public.

In a situation when the hardliners try to prevent further democratization and there is a formed civic society or in August coup attempt case formed opposition, there could be two outcomes – a successful repression of the old regime forces or the coup is unsuccessful and civic revolt follows, which happened in August 1991.9

After the coup attempt was over Mr. Yeltsin was the true winner. He was the man who acted at right place at right time. The coupists actually did him a great favor. President of the Soviet Union Gorbachev could do nothing at the time when Russian president Yeltsin gave a speech from tank, but sit at his dacha under KGB surveillance. After the coup was over he was back in the office, however, his position was severely shaken. Yeltsin grab the initiative again. With his fellow regional presidents buried the Soviet Union. Did Yeltsin do a coup on his own to dissolve the USSR? He acted by disregarding of the USSR constitution, however, it is hardly to blame him for doing that. The August coup attempt speeded up the disassembly of the Soviet system. Perestroika itself was terminated too. One of the major problems was that Gorbachev didn’t prevent the coup by deposing the hardliners from key positions and by establishing a team who would support him as Shevardnadze pointed out. Secondly, the Perestroika was a process, which liberalized economy and political sphere at the same time. The most of the Transitologists consider being more reasonable to liberalize the

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economy first\(^{10}\). There are several successful examples: Spain, ROC and with some difficulties ROK. This process isn’t domain of the rightwing authoritarian regimes. PRC and Vietnam are other example where economy is being transformed first. It is difficult to say today how the Asian communist countries will develop their political systems in the future.

For the GKChP and also for the Gorbachev it was difficult to offer something as the Soviet identity without binding it to communist ideology. For Yeltsin it was a different thing, he had a Russian national identity, the national issue which resonated in Baltic States even sooner. GKChP could refer to Brezhnev sentiment of the “stable” economy and some guaranteed social Welfare. Gorbachev could not even do that.

**Conclusion**

The August coup attempt was an important point in Soviet history. It was a point of no return. It severely weakened USSR President Michael Gorbachev and gave extra-constitutional legitimacy to hero of the hour: Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who used it to dissolve the USSR, which Gorbachev was unable to prevent. It was an abortive coup, which terminated Perestroika. It was catalyst element which speeded up the dissolution process of the USSR by shifting the power to the regional elites - Yeltsin, Kravchuk and others from the soviet central government who were able to dissolve the Soviet Union.

**Bibliography**


