



## Unraveling the Wagner Group and Yevgeny Prigozhin: The Enigma of Prigozhin's 'March of Justice

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### Abstract

The text discusses significant recent developments in Russia's political landscape, notably the Prigozhin insurgency, which challenged the "perception of stability" under President Putin. The author highlights the potential scenarios for the country's future. When examining the attempted coup in Russia, it's crucial to highlight Vladimir Putin's vulnerability, evident in his decision to permit Yevgeny Prigozhin and fellow Wagner PMC leaders to depart unhindered to Belarus.

There are enough hypotheses as to why the Wagner PMC, which always protected the interests of the Putin government, revolted against the government. The insurrection was so massive that mercenaries quickly captured Rostov-on-Don during the rebellion, entering the city, including in tanks. During the day, the rebels, with minimal resistance, passed the Voronezh, Lipetsk, and Tula regions, heading to Moscow. The swift conclusion of the rebellion within a day raises numerous uncertainties. The circumstances surrounding it remain puzzling: Prigozhin vanished from the scene, only for Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko to emerge.

The Ukrainian invasion has serious implications for the Putin government, potentially prompting changes in leadership. The failed coup attempt involving Prigozhin and his departure to Belarus raises questions about Putin's authority and possible arrangements.

The text concludes by discussing the impact of a coup on Russia's stability and the potential for multiple coups leading to a tumultuous transition with global implications. It emphasizes the interest in avoiding bloodshed and maintaining stability from both Russian and Western perspectives.

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**Keywords:** Russia, Wagner Group, Prigozhin

## **Introduction**

The wide audience was not familiar with the illegal activity of the so-called Wagner Group until the Kremlin's involvement in the conflict in Syria and the invasion policy against the Ukrainian state since the annexation of Crimea. It is a private military company (PMC) based in Russia, which gained international attention for its involvement in various conflicts, including Ukraine and Syria. While there have been reports and allegations of the Wagner Group's activities and possible instances of rebellion, it is essential to note that the information available is limited and subject to different interpretations due to the secretive nature of the organization.

The Wagner Group has close ties to the Russian government, particularly to Vladimir Putin, and conducts military operations on behalf of the Kremlin. However, due to its status as a private military company, the Russian government had always distanced itself from its activities, providing plausible deniability. It is not just any PMC because the group operates outside of established international norms and regulations governing military operations because of its violent nature. Its activities often raise concerns regarding accountability, transparency, and adherence to humanitarian standards.

However, even though the Wagner group conducted operations on behalf of the Putin government, the military company, with its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, suddenly decided to arrange the so-called "March of Justice" against the current Russian government on the night of 23 June. Wagnerites marched to Moscow in several columns. According to various estimates, there were over a thousand pieces of equipment, including tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, MLRS, trucks, etc. Russian authorities and the military tried to stop their progress. In the regions, restrictions were imposed on the path of the "March of Justice," bridges were built and undermined, and roads were blocked by public transport.

It stopped short of the capital city of Moscow. However, before, Vladimir Putin firmly condemned this act and vowed to find and punish the participants of this action. There are some versions of why the Wagner PMC, which always protected the interests of the Putting government, suddenly revolted against the government and their backer in the face of Vladimir Putin. The rebellion was of such significant scale that mercenary forces swiftly

seized control of Rostov-on-Don, infiltrating the city with the assistance of tanks. Progressing without much opposition, the rebels advanced through the Voronezh, Lipetsk, and Tula regions en route to Moscow.

The coup d'etat, however, did not happen. The Belarussian authoritarian leader, Alexander Lukashenko, took over the negotiator's mission and successfully coped with it. Prigozhin received security guarantees and the President of Belarus himself - a powerful private army. There will be, presumably, other consequences and severe ones.

### **Who is Yevgeny Prigozhin, and what connects him with the Wagner Group?**

Yevgeny Prigozhin is a Russian businessman and entrepreneur with close ties to the Russian government. He was born on June 1, 1961, in Leningrad, Soviet Union (now St. Petersburg, Russia). Prigozhin is often called "Putin's Chef" due to his close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his involvement in various business ventures connected to the government.

One of Prigozhin's notable connections is with the Wagner Group, a PMC that operates globally. The Wagner Group is believed to have been established by Prigozhin, although he has denied direct ownership. The group is named after the German composer Richard Wagner, reportedly chosen because Wagner's music was played during their training exercises (Heinemann-Grüder, A., & Aris, S., 2022).

Prigozhin has an extensive business empire, with interests spanning catering, restaurants, media, and mining. His company, Concord Management, and Consulting, is involved in various industries and has secured lucrative contracts with the Russian government. Prigozhin has a long-standing relationship with President Vladimir Putin, returning to the early 2000s. He has reportedly catered events for Putin and his government, contributing to his moniker, "Putin's Chef." Prigozhin's proximity to the Kremlin has enabled him to secure numerous government contracts.

The name of Prigozhin was not familiar for the majority of people. Beyond his culinary ventures, Prigozhin has been linked to various activities with geopolitical implications. This includes their active participation in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and their involvement in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Syrian government. Before the PMC's involvement in conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, Prigozhin always denied his direct ownership of the Wagner Group. However, mercenaries' active participation in both wars created strong evidence linking Prigozhin to the organization (Reynolds, N., & Riede, F., 2019).

The Wagner Group operates as a PMC, providing military support in conflict zones. It has been involved in operations in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and

other regions, often aligned with Russian interests. The Wagner Group has participated in armed conflicts on behalf of the Russian government. They have reportedly provided pro-Russian forces training, logistics, and combat support. Notably, the group's activities in Ukraine and Syria have drawn significant international attention and raised concerns about their actions and tactics (Marten, K., 2019).

Prigozhin denied any connection with the Wagner PMC for a long time and even sued journalists who claimed the opposite. And this is despite the fact that since 2018, it was for involvement in the activities of this company that Prigozhin was included in the US sanctions lists. But there was another reason - Prigozhin's assets by that time had a well-known "troll factory" - an office for sending fake or propaganda messages on social networks (Karpan, A. (Ed.), 2018).

Prigozhin became a genuinely famous public figure after the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine; then, he stopped hiding his connection with the Wagner PMC and the troll factory. In a short period of time, Prigozhin gained wide fame, the degree of which is difficult to assess accurately due to the lack of independent sociology in Russia. Prigozhin, apparently, with the consent of the Kremlin, was allowed to recruit mercenaries in Russian prisons among the convicts. At the same time, state media in Russia increasingly allowed references to PMC Wagner and called to join this company, which was never approved by any laws. Billboards advertising the company appeared in the country's cities, and mercenaries began to be involved in conducting propaganda "lessons about the important" in Russian schools (Karpan, A. (Ed.), 2018).

Before the start of the war, the number of Wagner PMCs was estimated at 2,500 people. Then, in the fall and winter of 2022-2023, the estimates reached 50 thousand. Prigozhin in prisons began to talk about the fact that heavy artillery and planes were at the disposal of PMCs. The Russian leadership entrusted mercenaries with an optional military but a politically significant section of the front under the Ukrainian Bakhmut (Clarke, C. P., 2023).

Due to his involvement with the Wagner Group, interference in international affairs, and their participation in destabilizing activities and election interference in various countries, Prigozhin has faced sanctions from the United States (US) and the European Union (EU). These sanctions include travel bans and asset freezes, targeting his business interests and limiting his international activities. The nature and activities of the Wagner Group and Prigozhin's involvement are very complex and opaque due to the secretive nature of private military companies and the limited transparency surrounding their operations.

### **Prigozhin's conflict with Gerasimov and Shoigu**

The scandal between the private military company Wagner and the leadership of the personnel army of the RF became more severe in February 2023. A video appeared on the network where allegedly "Wagnerites" shot portraits of Valery Gerasimov, commander of the united group of troops of the RF in Ukraine, and Alexander Lapin, chief of the general staff of the ground forces of Russia. The founder of the PMC, oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, called this video fake (Farbman, S., 2023).

The press service of the Wagner group in the Telegram channel on February 18 circulated a comment by the owner of the PMC. He claimed that he did not see the video with the "shooting," but he was described in detail. In the clip, two men in military uniform and balaclavas said there was a "class exercise" for machine gunners - shooting a pectoral figure over 100 meters. Then one of the mercenaries in the lying position fired at the targets (they are not visible in the frame at first). When the machine gunner reached his feet, the camera pointed at training targets. It turned out that these were portraits of Gerasimov and Lapin (Farbman, S., 2023).

On May 9, Prigozhin said that the Russian army escaped from positions in Bakhmut and exposed one of the front flanks, which had to be covered by the Wagnerites. He delivered an ultimatum to the Ministry of Defense (MD) of the RF and the General Staff - if his mercenaries are not allocated ammunition, they will leave their positions (Terry, G. S., 2023).

On May 12, Prigozhin extended an invitation to Sergei Shoigu, asking him to travel to Bakhmut. Prigozhin emphasized the complex operational situation and Shoigu's substantial experience in military matters. He requested Shoigu to assess the current conditions independently, noting that Bakhmut is currently under the control of paramilitary units from the RF (Terry, G. S., 2023).

Prigozhin made another grandiose statement on June 21. He said that the Armed Forces of Ukraine control the settlements of P'yatykhatky, the southern part of Robotino in the Zaporizhzhya region, and Urozhaynoye in the Donetsk region, stressing that the Russians quickly succumbed to "huge pieces" and put no effort to maintain the control over these territories (Farbman, S., 2023).

On June 23, the leader of the PMC, Wagner, announced the beginning of an armed conflict with the MD of the RF. He said 25,000 of his mercenaries were going to "restore justice." Prigozhin allegedly called the reason for the strike of the Russian army on the rear camps of the Wagnerites in Rostov. However, it is well-known that the conflict between Prigozhin and Shoigu began much earlier. Over the past few months, the leader of Wagner has persistently demanded the resignation of the MD, Shoigu, accusing him of

poor management of the invaders' troops and insufficient supply of ammunition to the Wagner Group.

In addition, Prigozhin expressed that he had applied to the Investigative Committee of the RF for Russian DM, Shoigu, and Chief of the General Staff of the RF, Valery Gerasimov. The press service of Yevgeny Prigozhin reported this. Yevgeny Prigozhin made another shocking statement that Valery Gerasimov and Sergei Shoigu are responsible for the death of tens of thousands of Russians. In addition, the businessman claims that the military leaders are responsible for losing the "occupied" Ukrainian territories to the control of the Ukrainian army. According to Prigozhin (Macfarquhar, N., 2023).

On the same day, Prigozhin said that while the reports of the Russian DM refer to the successes of the Russian Armed Forces, the Russians at the front suffered colossal losses and retreated not only in the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson directions but also in Bakhmutsky. Considering the dynamics of the Wanger's revolt, the head of the Wagner intended to capture the head of the Russian DM Sergei Shoigu and the chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov during the armed rebellion. This was reported by the Wall Street Journal, citing intelligence and statements by unnamed officials. According to WSJ sources, the FSB learned about the rebels' plans two days before the start of the rebellion, so Prigozhin's daring plan lost its quality of surprise ([www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com), June 28, 2023).

The leak of information about the rebellion forced Prigozhin to start speaking earlier than planned and "improvise" during the practical implementation of the plan. Sources of the publication believe that Prigozhin could notify the commander of the aerospace forces of the RF, General Sergei Surovikin, about his plans. Some other generals of the Russian DM also knew about the preparation of the rebellion. Still, they did not oppose Prigozhin and his fighters when they entered Rostov-on-Don (Sonne, P., 2023).

### **Prigozhin's announcement concerning the armed insurrection**

On Friday evening, June 23, Prigozhin attempted to realize an armed revolt. In his telegram channel, Prigozhin announced that the Russian army under the leadership of Sergei Shoigu allegedly struck at the rear of the Wagner PMC, and he is ready to respond to it. Prigozhin demanded to remove the country's military leadership. He pointed out that he had 25,000 fighters at his disposal and threatened to destroy checkpoints and aircraft in case of resistance (Hopkins, V., 2023).

The next day, June 24, Wagner militants took control of Russian military facilities in Rostov-on-Don and Voronezh. Wagnerites occupied the building of the headquarters of the Southern Military District in Rostov-on-Don - armed people walked through the streets, and checkpoints were installed

at the entrances to the city. Prigozhin noted that "no one was resisting them." According to Prigozhin, the Wagner mercenaries shot down a helicopter that opened fire on the PMC convoy (Hopkins, V., 2023).

Moreover, the military company also destroyed seven aircraft of Russian aviation. From Rostov, Prigozhin published an appeal in which he demanded access to the highest military leadership of the RF and threatened to "march to Moscow." The situation was developing so fast that it was impossible to follow the news. Almost all news channels reported simultaneously that a criminal case was opened against Prigozhin for "organizing an armed rebellion" in Moscow. Moreover, the security forces were preparing for a siege, and Vladimir Putin, according to Ukrainian intelligence, urgently left Moscow for Valdai (Schmemmann, S., 2023).

However, when the convoy of Wagner Group was already in the Moscow region, the press service of the self-proclaimed president of Belarus said that Alexander Lukashenko had held talks with Prigozhin, and he accepted the proposal to stop the convoy. Soon after, Prigozhin announced he was "turning the columns" from near Moscow and "going backward" to field camps. The Kremlin soon announced that the criminal case against Prigozhin would be closed, and he would leave for Belarus.

Even though the Wagner mercenaries didn't get control over the capital of Russia and didn't remove Shoigu and Gerasimov as Prigozhin initially declared in his video appeal, the armed insurrection, the Wagner group's military march to Moscow, getting control over Rostov-on-Don and Voronezh, the government's hopelessness and powerless, all these left extremely irreparable "wounds" in Putin's and his government's image. The world watched the whole situation with shock, how the state, which allegedly possess the second army in the world, could not even resist against the Wagner mercenaries.

### **How did the Russian government react?**

Almost immediately after Prigozhin's speech and the advance of his columns towards Rostov, the Prosecutor General's Office announced that the FSB had opened a criminal case against Yevgeny Prigozhin under the article "Armed Rebellion" and warned that sanctions concerning the criminal case with the imprisonment from 12 to 20 years. Also, the official media reported that the president was aware of what was happening, and Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov informed him about the criminal case ([epp.genproc.gov.ru](http://epp.genproc.gov.ru), June 24, 2023).

The Lipetsk, Voronezh, Moscow regions and Moscow authorities introduced a counter-terrorist operation regime, canceled all mass events, and urged residents not to leave their homes unless necessary. On all sides

bordering the Moscow Region, transit travel on the federal highways Don, Ural, and Crimea was limited.

On Saturday morning in St. Petersburg, security forces entered the PMC Wagner Center office building on Zolnaya Street, and searches began. The FSB called on the PMC officers to detain Prigozhin. On Saturday morning, June 24, the Russian DM announced that all Prigozhin's statements were a provocation. It appealed "to the soldiers of the assault detachments of the Wagner PMC that they were misled into joining Prigozhin's unlawful endeavor and becoming involved in an armed uprising. Numerous members of various units have come to recognize their error and have sought assistance to ensure a safe return to their designated permanent deployment locations (Hopkins, V., 2023).

### **What did Putin say?**

At 10 am on Saturday, Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the country's residents. He stated: "*The actions that split our unity are a blow to the back of the country and our people,*" cited the 1917 revolution as an example and noted that the country would be protected "from internal betrayal." Putin called Prigozhin's act a betrayal, never in his speech uttering the name of the head of the Wagner PMC (kremlin.ru, 24 June 2023).

In his televised speech on the morning of June 24, the president stated that the armed rebellion organized by the head of the Wagner PMC, Yevgeny Prigozhin, resulted from "exorbitant ambitions" that led to treason and betrayal. He called on the rebels to stop participating in criminal acts and the rest - not to join the traitors. Putin stressed that the authorities will react harshly to what is happening. Moreover, he added that the fate of Russia is being decided, and this requires the people to unite all forces (kremlin.ru, 24 June 2023).

On the evening of June 26, the Russian leader again addressed a speech to the Russians. He thanked them for their cohesion and patriotism during recent events. Putin also said that from the very beginning, all immediate measures were taken to prevent bloodshed, noted the courage of the military and law enforcement agencies, and also assured that his promise, made by PMC Wagner, would be fulfilled (Turner, G., & Sukhankin, S., 2023).

Moreover, Vladimir Putin pointed out that the solidarization of citizens living on the state's territory made it possible to see that any manipulations for blackmail, which were recorded against the background of a vague moment, would not have an effect. As part of a video message broadcast on television channels, he noted that within the framework of the current state of affairs, citizens of the RF were extremely strongly solidarized (Turner, G., & Sukhankin, S., 2023).

However, despite Putin's gratification to the Russian people for their responsible approach to the country's future, the local population of Rostov-on-Don and others by the Wagner Group either didn't support the Russian government or indirectly supported the military company and their insurrection against the Russian government. There are some video facts about the local citizens taking pictures with Prigozhin and the Wagner mercenaries. Moreover, it needed to be made clear where the head of the Russian government was and how good he was at controlling the situation in the country (Carll, K., & Karthikeyan, S., 2023).

The image of the great leader and warrantee Russia's stability in the face of Vladimir Putin's stability is significantly damaged. However, it should be made clear that it is one thing to damage the image and another to hurt his absolute power. The revolt of the leader of the Wagner group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, raises several questions regarding the position of Russian President Vladimir Putin. It was clear from the beginning that Putin's vulnerability was not political but military. The reason is quite simple: Putin has oppressed the opposition in Russia since the early days of his governance.

### **Who did deploy Prigozhin?**

At about 8 pm on Saturday, it became known that, with the approval of Putin, the Belarusian's authoritarian leader, Alexander Lukashenko negotiated with Prigozhin throughout the day and convinced him to turn around. As a result, agreements were reached on the inadmissibility of unleashing a bloody massacre on the territory of Russia, so Alexander Lukashenko. Yevgeny Prigozhin accepted the proposal of Alexander Lukashenko to stop the movement of armed militants of the Wagner company in Russia and further steps to de-escalate the tension (Schmemann, S., 2023).

Lukashenko's press service has declared that there is a viable and agreeable solution on the table to resolve the situation, one that includes providing security assurances for the personnel affiliated with the Wagner Private Military Company. Later, there was a response from Prigozhin. He stated that "not a single drop of the blood of our fighters was spilled" during this time" (Schmemann, S., 2023).

He went on to emphasize the current critical juncture, expressing concern about the potential for bloodshed. Acknowledging the gravity of the situation and the possibility of Russian casualties on either side, he stated that they are taking action by mobilizing their columns and redirecting them away from the field camps as per the established plan (Pant, H. V., 2023).

The Russian government guaranteed not to pursue the fighters of the Wagner PMC, those who took part in the "campaign." "Taking into account their merits at the front," those who refused to participate in the "march" would be allowed to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defense" was the official

position of the government. Dmitry Peskov, the Press Secretary of the Russian President, announced that the criminal case against Yevgeny Prigozhin will be closed, and Prigozhin is expected to relocate to Belarus. The assurance for this arrangement is based on the word of the President of Russia (Pant, H. V., 2023).

Alexander Lukashenko said that during negotiations with him, Yevgeny Prigozhin refused his demands, including the resignation of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Head of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov. One of the main conditions for PMC Wagner and Prigozhin was the absence of any casualties, especially among the civilian population. The following condition, on the fulfillment of which both parties agreed, is to stop the further movement of the PMC column to Moscow. In a conversation with Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko asked his colleague not to allow a forceful resolution of the situation. According to him, he promised and fulfilled the agreement (Faulkner, C., Clarke, C. P., & Parens, R., 2023).

What do we have at the moment? The Wagner Group returned to their places of deployment. Prigozhin went to Belarus - under the guarantee of Alexander Lukashenko, who now if the head of the PMC transports at least half of his troops to Belarus, the Kremlin will get a very combat-ready, well-trained, and private solid army in Belarus. The latter circumstance, by the way, is already causing great nervousness in both Kyiv and Warsaw. They understand that the appearance of the Wagner army may threaten near the borders of Ukraine and Poland.

### **Main versions regarding the state coup attempt**

#### **Version 1. Cutting off the Wagner PMC from state funding and liquidating in the future**

One of the most potent versions of why Prigozhin and the Wagner PMC rebelled against the current Russian government, particularly Gerasimov and Shoigu, is the version that Prigozhin understood that the Russian government was planning to completely cut off the Wagner PMC from state funding and liquidate the future. It was discussed in the different layers of the Russian government that the Wagner rebellion was associated with the complete disconnection of the group from state funding (Lohmus, E. H., 2023). The Putin government had stopped the money flow for salaries, logistics, and maintenance of the PMC group. As a result, Prigozhin acknowledged that he was now being degraded and then removed, so he attempted to get the best conditions for himself and the PMC.

In January, Prigozhin said that inside Russia, there was a "serious struggle" for PMC fighters to leave Africa. It was claimed that some forces were trying to cut funding for a private military company so that its maintenance on the territory of the African continent became impossible.

Since the activity of the Wagner Group is illegal, it is difficult to find some justifiable sources shedding light on the Wagner mercenary's presence in Africa. However, some valid information about the group's activity in Africa exists. For instance, the Wagner Group has been involved in several countries on the continent, including Sudan, Libya, and the Central African Republic (CAR). In Sudan, they were contracted by the Sudanese government to provide security and support during the country's political transition. In Libya, the group has been accused of supporting the forces of General Khalifa Haftar in their fight against the UN-backed government in Tripoli. In the CAR, the Wagner Group has had a significant presence. They have trained and advised the country's armed forces and participated in combat operations against rebel groups (Gould-Davies, N., 2023).

The Wagner PMC is a military company of mercenaries, so it is clear that the Russian government pays for their participation in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, so the problems with financing the "work" of PMCs in Ukraine are not reported. RBC wrote that the salary of Wagner PMC employees in a "special operation" in Ukraine to participate in hostilities starts from 240 thousand rubles a month, about \$2600 (Nurhaliza, S., & Burhanuddin, A., 2023). A private military company received ammunition, including from the Russian DM, but on what conditions it is unclear. Ironically, the Wagner PMC was more successful than the Russian army in its invasion of Ukraine. For instance, despite numerous loud statements about artificial shell hunger, PMC fighters took control of Bakhmut in May.

However, it is important to mention that regarding cutting off the Wagner PMC from state funding, there were no signs of a lack of money from PMC Wagner. For instance, on June 24, during searches in the courtyard of the Trezzini Hotel in St. Petersburg, which is associated with the founder of the PMC, a cargo gazelle filled with cash boxes was found. The entrepreneur himself soon explained that in the cargo vehicles and two buses, there were funds allocated for salaries, as well as for the payment of the so-called compensation "cargo 200" and other purposes (Hopkins, V., & Martínez, A. R., 2023).

The revolt brought with itself a new political constellation in Russia. If the Russian government used to deny its connection with the Wagner Group. Putin publicly admitted that the Wagner Group was fully supported by the state (Hopkins, V., & Martínez, A. R., 2023).

### **Version 2. A staged putsch**

One of the most popular versions is that it was a staged putsch, excellently played by the Wagner PMC and the Putin government. Everything was agreed with the head of state. This event was supposed to serve as a reason for changing the leadership of the MD and identifying the fifth column of disloyalty to the Kremlin, the beginning of the purge of the elite. The lost war

in Ukraine significantly negatively impacted Putin's image. Suppose he was accepted as a strong leader in Russian society, and nobody could even dare to go against him, the Russian elite. In that case, the situation has changed significantly since the start of the war in February 2022. Therefore, Putin also needs an elite "purge." Still, he couldn't be its initiator since he has unofficial inter-elite "agreements," their unilateral violation will lead to a sharp increase in anti-Putin sentiments.

By 10 am, it became clear what was happening when Putin spoke. One of the very well-known political experts of Russia, Maksim Shevchenko asserts that he was highly confident that the situation would conclude in just one or two days, with a 90 percent likelihood of it favoring Putin. Consequently, he wasn't overly concerned about the unfolding events. In this specific scenario, Shevchenko believes it is appropriate to designate both Putin and Prigozhin as key figures or participants in the unfolding events (echofm.online, 26 June 2023).

In addition, the authorities have an excellent way of identifying representatives of the fifth column. Panic in Moscow, expensive tickets for foreign flights. This was an excellent opportunity to open disguised agents, which will be covered. The object of the Putin-Prigozhin attack was the Russian elite and its specific representatives. The main goal was to squeeze Shoigu and those who stood for Shoigu. Shevchenko believes that the current MD of the RF since the 1990s has grown so rooted in elite clans that it is impossible to dismiss him by presidential decree; in fact, this requires a whole coup d'état. It was necessary to create a crisis of such a scale that it influenced.

In this whole story, we can assign a key role to the Belarussian dictator, whose diplomatic efforts, according to the official version, forced Prigozhin to send his fighters back to field camps instead of "going to Moscow." The participation of the head of another state in the settlement of the domestic political conflict means "the transition of the entire political system of the RF to the dimension of the Union State." In this situation, the head of Belarus receives certain preferences and prospects.

What is the Union State? This is the formation, for example, of new management structures of the Union States, as the states of Russia and Belarus. This means that the MD of the Union State can be formed, which will no longer be headed by Shoigu. Moreover, both parliament and special services can wait for such a fate.

However, some other experts do not believe that Putin knew about Prigozhin's plans. They think that it was an attempt at a military coup. Judging by how quickly everything ended, Prigozhin believed that Putin would support him (Schmemmann, S., 2023). Some political experts are drawing some parallels between the most recent and the military coup attempt that happened some months before the official fall of the USSR (Schmemmann, S., 2023).

Comparison initiatives to compare the recent military coup attempt with the one organized in August 1991 are irrelevant.

Consequently, in August 1991, a group of high-ranking Soviet officials, including members of the government and the KGB, formed the State Emergency Committee (SEC) to seize power and halt the political reforms initiated by Gorbachev. The SEC sought to undermine Gorbachev's authority and restore stricter control over the Soviet Union. When Gorbachev learned about the coup attempt, he was initially placed under house arrest while vacationing in Crimea. However, he condemned the actions of the SEC and refused to endorse or cooperate with the coup plotters. Gorbachev maintained his commitment to the political and economic reforms he had implemented, known as perestroika and glasnost. Despite his opposition, Gorbachev's position weakened temporarily as the coup plotters declared an emergency and attempted to take control of the country. However, their coup ultimately failed due to widespread public opposition and support for Gorbachev.

Understanding that comparing these two political events is irrelevant is enough to recall because of a couple of facts. First of all, now it was enough to look at the speech of the Kremlin's head to understand that there was no "agreement" between high-ranking government officials. Judging by how the political class behaved, if anyone expected an outcome than a clear minority, the majority was in shock. Secondly, despite Vladimir Putin's loud statements regarding consolidating Russian society, the society didn't support the government.

Secondly, people proceeded from the fact that Prigozhin is an eccentric man but quite manageable, and his harsh criticism of Shoigu is verbal. Therefore, talking about what everyone knew is an "afterthought." When this happened, many claimed that they foresaw everything. However, the society didn't support the Wagner PMC either. The Russian society waited to see how everything was going to end. There are several reasons for the inactivity of Russian society. For instance, Russia has a long history of centralized and authoritarian rule, which has shaped the development of civil society. The state has often suppressed or controlled independent social and political organizations, limiting their growth and influence. This legacy has created a culture where people may hesitate to engage in collective action. In addition, historical and cultural factors, coupled with state control, have contributed to a sense of apathy or fear among some segments of the Russian population. People may be reluctant to engage in civil society activities due to concerns about reprisals, lack of trust in institutions, or a belief that they cannot effect meaningful change.

### **Version 3. The purpose of the rebellion was the redeployment of the Wagner PMC to Belarus to strike at Kyiv**

One of the curious conspiracy versions is that all this was started to redeploy the combat-ready Wagner PMC to the territory of a friendly state, Belarus, where it would be possible to hit Ukraine.

The Russian private military company Wagner, reportedly under the leadership of Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is often referred to as Putin's close associate, could potentially initiate a new offensive on Kyiv, this time possibly launching it from Belarusian territory. Ukrainian leaders should remain vigilant and consider the potential threat of an attack orchestrated by Prigozhin and the Wagner group on the Ukrainian capital, a British general, former chief of the British General Staff Richard Dannat, told Sky News. *"The fact that he left for Belarus causes some concern,"* the expert said. In addition, Dannat warned that if Prigozhin *"retained combat-ready forces around him, then he again poses a threat to the Ukrainian flank closest to Kyiv,"* where a full-scale war with the Russian Federation began (news.sky.com, June 26, 2023).

The illegitimate President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, answered negatively when asked if PMC Wagner would use the republic's territory to attack other countries. He noted that if the PMC works in Belarus, then it, like the army, would protect the interests of the country. Lukashenko has emphasized that Belarus has not initiated any attacks on other nations and has no intention of doing so in the future. Furthermore, he asserted that Belarus has no plans for anyone to launch attacks from its territory. However, he made it clear that if his country faces aggression, Belarus will respond appropriately in self-defense (Fix, L., & Kimmage, M., 2023).

Let's interpret Lukashenko's view regarding the Wagner PMC in the following way. The issue of the placement of PMCs has not been resolved, and this may not happen if "the Russian leadership makes such a decision." As part of an agreement to resolve the situation around the rebellion, Mr. Lukashenko guaranteed Yevgeny Prigozhin's security in his country.

It is worth remembering that at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Belarus allowed the Russian troops to invade Ukraine from its territory, and the invaders managed to capture part of the Chernihiv and Kyiv regions. A few months later, Ukrainian soldiers drove the invaders from the north of our state.

The Ukrainian side reported that the RF transferred several thousand of its troops to Belarus, in particular, mobilized. Military exercises are constantly underway on Belarusian territory. Ukrainian border guards reported that there was no threat of a new invasion. However, the war was unpredictable, and the Russian government is so desperate that nobody can

entirely exclude that Vladimir Putin would not order to open the second flank from Belarus to invade Ukraine.

#### **Version 4. Shoigu and Gerasimov provoked their opponent**

Another version is based on the belief that the Russian army leadership provoked Prigozhin to such decisive actions, showing the Kremlin that he was uncontrolled and simply dangerous to the authorities. Obviously, we are dealing with a severe conflict at the top between the Shoigu group, a man from the 90s, from the Yeltsin era, and people who grew up surrounded by Putin.

The danger of an apex coup in Russia is just paused. It happened once so that it would happen again. The fact that today we were shown how Shoigu fulfills his direct duties also adds a touch to the picture of the central government crisis. The reason for the armed campaign of the Wagner PMC against Moscow was the aggravated conflict between Yevgeny Prigozhin and Minister Sergei Shoigu, and this development was quite expected. There is no direct connection between Prigozhin's actions and the Ukrainian counteroffensive, even though it is clear that this is happening in the context of the conflict. Wagner has already moved away from the front line to reorganize.

Prigozhin acted spontaneously in the heat of the moment, so Prigozhin's actions can be described as "naturally spontaneous." Prigozhin has long been in the mode of accusations against Shoigu and Gerasimov. He was in a high degree of tension in the battles for Artyomovsk. Then the PMC went to the rear. After the so-called airstrike on the Wagner PMC camp, Prigozhin announced a campaign against Moscow.

It is claimed that an order was issued for the PMC to sign a contract with the MD (Khvostunova, O., Parens, R., Hess, M., Hamilton, R. E., & Wasielewski, P., 2023). This is unacceptable for Prigozhin due to personal ambitions. Consequently, since the order was issued, it had to be executed or answered differently. Actions were spontaneous and emotional. There was hardly a long-range plan. Since Prigozhin and the Wagner PMC acted based on emotions and Prigozhin's actions were not thought out and were risky, it is hard to comment on what intentions Prigozhin and the Wagner mercenaries had with attempting to move towards Moscow. The only valid argument is that Prigozhin has a severe conflict with Shoigu and Gerasimov. After Prigozhin's video speech addressed Shoigu and Gerasimov, the public knew about it.

#### **Version 5. The Kremlin has shown the West who it will have to deal with if there is no Putin**

It is claimed that the Senior US officials knew about Prigozhin's plan (Bengali, S., 2023). The American intelligence community is focused on the

situation with Russian nuclear arsenals. PMC Wagner's "March of Justice" to Moscow revived old fears in Washington about whose hands nuclear weapons could fall into the RF in the event of internal shocks (Bengali, S., 2023).

We understand the consequences of a coup d'etat in the most considerable nuclear power. In human history, it has not yet been such that the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons is under the control of any state. Such a crisis will not be limited to one country. The world will be brought to the brink of destruction. All this should have strengthened the position of the current Russian government in future negotiations with the West. According to this version, it is the Kremlin's message to the collective West: if you don't want to negotiate with me (Putin), you will have to do this with bandits.

Today it cannot be assumed that Prigozhin's idea failed. He wouldn't be the dictator of all of Russia or take Putin's place. It was a demonstration: "Movement is everything; the ultimate goal is nothing." Another thing is what will happen next. The main question is: who will be Putin's successor? What is happening shows what will happen to him; we will have a story, as in the film "Death of Stalin." Putin needs to determine how to ensure continuity in the future. Otherwise, the elites can suffer - the one with more divisions will win. The chief has not left yet, and the race has already begun.

While the Russian president thinks of him and his future on the throne, the capture of the government by Prigozhin or any other person would have highly negative consequences for Russia and neighboring countries and the world. Again, Russia is the largest nuclear power in the world. It is frightening to think about the world's future when everyone understands that the biggest nuclear power might be under the control of Prigozhin or anyone else like him.

### **The reasons leading to the state coup attempt and what is next?**

The philosopher and main ideologist of the Russian world, Alexander Dugin, calling the current moment a turning point, calls two scenarios by which further events can develop: "good" and "terrible." In the first scenario, in addition to conducting a "rotation of elites," these are "punishing cowards and traitors," "encouraging the faithful and courageous," and "correcting ideology towards patriotic self-awareness, social justice and the real inclusion of society in the war." In the second, "leave everything as it is." That is, do not change anything and clean any mention of June 24 and its defendants from the media and blogosphere (Clark, C., Glick, K., Joyner, L., Shepard, A., & Zilge, C., 2023).

Putin's government suffers from the authoritarian political regime in Russia that he created by himself. Over the years, his government has taken various measures to suppress opposition voices and maintain control over the political landscape. The Russian government exercises significant control over the traditional and digital media. State-owned media outlets dominate the

news landscape and often portray Putin in a positive light while marginalizing or demonizing opposition figures. Independent media organizations critical of the government have faced censorship, intimidation, and harassment.

Boris Nemtsov was a prominent Russian opposition politician and a vocal critic of President Vladimir Putin's government. He was assassinated on February 27, 2015, in Moscow, steps away from the Kremlin. His investigation into his murder is still ongoing. Nemtsov's supporters and many in the international community believe that his assassination was politically motivated, given his role as a prominent government critic. The convicted perpetrators of the assassination were Chechen men, and the investigation and trial suggested their involvement in the killing. However, there have been questions about the possible participation of higher-ranking individuals or even the Russian state, which critics argue may have played a role in orchestrating or facilitating the assassination.

Other prominent opposition leaders, such as Alexei Navalny, have faced harassment, arrest, and imprisonment. He is a vocal critic of Putin and his government. He has been arrested multiple times. On August 20, 2020, he fell critically ill during a domestic flight in Russia and was initially hospitalized in Omsk, Siberia. After pressure from his supporters and international leaders, he was later allowed to be airlifted to Germany for medical treatment. Moreover, in February 2021, he was sentenced to two and a half years in prison on charges of violating probation while recovering from a poisoning attempt, an incident he and his supporters believe was organized by the Russian state.

On the ground in Ukraine, the crisis undermines the morale of Russian military personnel since they never understood the fundamental goals of the military operation against the brother nation. Putin is not happy with his army and its capacity. He doesn't seem to have much confidence in the Russian military because Prigozhin has publicly criticized the Russian army, and Putin has allowed that. The war showed clearly that the Russian army's military potential is far from being the second army in the world, so Putin no longer trusts his army.

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was speculated that the Russian army had the capacity to capture the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv, in two days. The Russian military failed to achieve this goal, and the Ukrainian army currently has a morale and military advantage over the Russian army. Although doubts are growing in Russia about the effectiveness of the war under Shoigu's command, they are not expected to be seriously manifested on the ground. Putin might make severe changes in the military and government leadership after the 2024 elections.

Analyzing the coup attempt in Russia, it is essential to note that Vladimir Putin showed his weakness by allowing Yevgeny Prigozhin and

other commanders of the Wagner PMC to leave peacefully for Belarus. The rebellion itself, which ended in less than a day, left many questions. What was it? Prigozhin disappeared, and the Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko appeared on the stage. He helped Putin resolve the situation, persuaded the founder of the Wagner PMC not to go on a campaign against Moscow, and offered asylum for his troops in his country.

Prigozhin understands that he is expected to be poisoned by "Novichok," polonium, or prison for life, and he will try to take action to prevent this. We see only some of the deal concluded between him and Vladimir Putin - whether through Alexander Lukashenko. However, there are two facts. The first is that Prigozhin was allowed to leave for Belarus; the case initiated against him has been closed. Vladimir Putin hinted that other issues could be initiated - for embezzlement of public funds, said that the RF gave almost 300 billion rubles to Prigozhin's structures over the previous year (Liadze, I., Macchiarelli, C., Mortimer-Lee, P., & Sanchez Juanino, P., 2023). Nevertheless, there is no such thing now. Second, some of Wagner's structures could be moved to Belarus.

A coup d'etat for Russia will have severe consequences for the predecessor of the USSR. A series of such coups d'etat will lead to the situation that, most likely, some enclaves will appear on the territory of the RF that will want to break away from the federal government. We often discuss ethnic republics or areas with resources to conduct independent activities and paramilitary units. The so-called volunteer units, which Wagner coached, are now actively being created in different Russian regions. Wagner instructors worked in the Belgorod region and the Tula region. In this sense, the coup d'etat will not do anything good for the Putin government. Another thing is that, most likely, a coup doesn't only come once. Once the coup d'etat happened, the military junta that came to power would probably not hold.

There will be more and more coups, and the military juntas will replace one another, and the chance of democratization after some time due to these coups will probably increase but through a lot of blood. Nevertheless, interestingly, Russia, the Russian government, and the West are barely interested in bloodshed in Russia. In contrast, the West needs a stable Russia, the world's largest nuclear state with a stable government.

## **Conclusion**

The Prigozhin insurgency shook the country's political landscape, dealing a deadly blow to the myth of "Putin's stability." Many were especially surprised by the footage, if not the fraternization of the "Wagnerites" with the residents of Rostov, then a kind, almost curious attitude towards armed people who did not represent the army of DM Sergei Shoigu.

In conclusion, the Wagner PMC rebellion in Russia is a complex and multifaceted event, and various theories attempt to shed light on its motivations and implications. These theories range from financial concerns to political maneuvers, geopolitical strategies, and internal power struggles within the Russian government.

The rebellion has raised questions about the stability and future of Russia's leadership, as well as its potential impact on neighboring countries and the world, given Russia's status as a major nuclear power. Regardless of the specific motivations behind the rebellion, it has highlighted the fragility of power dynamics within Russia and the potential for unexpected and destabilizing events.

The true nature and purpose of the Wagner PMC rebellion may remain a subject of debate, and its long-term consequences are uncertain. It underscores the need for careful analysis and monitoring of developments in Russia, as they have the potential to reverberate both regionally and globally.

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