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RUSSIA IS SHAKING: WAGNER MERCENARIES TURN THEIR BACK ON PUTIN



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Introduction

“During the night of 23 June and the morning of 24 June, the Russian Wagner paramilitary group, under the leadership of Yevgeny Prigozhin, initiated a military uprising against the Russian military. Prigozhin accused the military command of attacking his soldiers on Wagner’s field camps in Ukraine, where his troops have been fighting on behalf of Russia, leading to intense tensions and armed clashes on the Russian battlefield. However, the insurrection failed after reaching a critical point at approximately 19:00 (CEST) on 24 June. At this juncture, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, with the participation of Vladimir Putin, managed to broker an "agreement" that convinced Prigozhin to halt the uprising.

The mutiny conducted by the Wagner Group against the Russian government has had profound repercussions within Russia and beyond. This armed insurrection, led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, represents a significant turning point in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and exposes bitter divisions within the Putin regime. The failed coup attempt not only exposes vulnerabilities within Russia's military and security apparatus but also raises concerns about the potential outbreak of civil war and the potential disintegration of the Russian Federation. This article overviews the events surrounding the Wagner mutiny and analyses its implications for Russia and the international community.

Wagner and the “March for Justice”

Wagner is a mercenary militia born in 2014 under the initiative of the GRU, the Russian military counterespionage (Caracciolo, 2023). It is a Russian deep state military unit, constituting a part of the Russian power apparatus (Caracciolo, 2023). Prigozhin and Wagner are both Putin’s creations. However, today, Wagner represents a young creature that has transformed into a formidable entity that exceeds its original purpose, becoming more aggressive in undertaking its actions.

On the night of 23 June, Prigozhin declared war against Sergei Shoigu, the Russian Minister of Defence, and the entire Russian military (The Guardian, 2023). The Wagner insurgents marched on the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don at night, aiming to arrive in Moscow (The Guardian, 2023). Prigozhin's "march for justice" represented the extreme manifestation of a project that had been in motion for months (Watling, 2023). According to Caracciolo (2023), it involved cooperation between Russian armed forces officials, intelligence agents, disillusioned oligarchs who had lost their fortunes in the West, individuals from Putin's inner circle and even far-right extremists and neo-Nazis (Caracciolo, 2023). Despite Russia's motives behind Ukraine’s invasion, which included so-called “de-Nazification” efforts in Kyiv, it is paradoxical that the Wagner mercenaries consist mainly of extremists and neo-Nazis (Askew, 2023).

At Rostov-on-Don, Prigozhin encountered little resistance, capitalising on the “surprise effect” (Caracciolo, 2023). Intense clashes involving aerial vehicles and sophisticated weaponry occurred primarily in Voronezh, north of Rostov (ISPI, 2023). However, Rostov holds strategic importance for the Wagner militia, as its control ensures the smooth logistics of supporting the Russian front in Donbas and neighbouring regions (ISPI, 2023).

Prigozhin's justification for the march stems from the Russian military operation in Bakhmut conducted during the Russian offensive of winter 2023, which Wagner mercenaries successfully carried out. According to Prigozhin, the Russian army elites have risked the lives of many Wagner militias while trying to protect those of regular forces (Reuters, 2023). Prigozhin's plans were outlined in Telegram messages; for example, on 24 May he questioned the Kremlin's "special operation," arguing that instead of demilitarising Ukraine, Russia had armed the country and facilitated Western support (Caracciolo, 2023).

Following the mutiny, Prigozhin struck a deal to leave Russia and sought refuge in Belarus, with assurances that charges against him would be dropped (Yerushalmy, 2023). The whereabouts of Wagner soldiers remain uncertain, although some have reportedly headed to their bases in eastern Ukraine (Yerushalmy, 2023). The Kremlin has hinted at the dissolution of Wagner, encouraging fighters to sign contracts with the Russian Defence Ministry (Institute for the Study of War [ISW], 2023). Putin further emphasised that "volunteer units" should sign these contracts by 1 July (ISW, 2023).

Putinism at Danger?

The power dynamics within Putin's hierarchical leadership system are undergoing a significant reshuffling among various factions (Caracciolo, 2023). This presents Putin with the most substantial political crisis he has ever faced (IIPost, 2023). Despite the negative consequences of Russia's decision to invade Ukraine, the legitimacy factor has played a crucial role in maintaining calm among the Russian population (IIPost, 2023). However, Prigozhin's march against Russia threatens this legitimacy (IIPost, 2023). Putin's notable failure lies in his inability to prevent Prigozhin's attempted coup, highlighting the vulnerability of Russian military structures and the security apparatus (Caracciolo, 2023). In the worst-case scenario, this could have escalated into a civil war akin to the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

To better understand the events, it is necessary to determine whether Prigozhin's actions stem from an internal sense of injustice among the Wagner mercenaries or if he has received external support (Sanger & Barnes, 2023). The United States, while relieved by the chaos that weakens Moscow's strategic advantage in the war, also recognises the dangerous potential of Prigozhin's criminal rule and the risk of a nuclear threat that could arise from it (Caracciolo, 2023). Putin has labelled Prigozhin a "terrorist" and a "traitor," yet he treads carefully when addressing him, as Prigozhin may still serve the Kremlin in its war efforts (Aljazeera, 2023). Indeed, the relative success of Wagner in the ongoing war in Ukraine contrasts with that of Putin's regular Russian army, which has proven to be much weaker than previously believed.

What is the meaning of Africa?

Wagner has played a significant role in advancing Moscow's foreign policy objectives globally, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. The uncertain future of Wagner also carries implications for Africa, where the group has steadily expanded its political, military and economic influence (Al-Jazeera, 2023). With an estimated 5,000 troops stationed across the continent, Wagner and Prigozhin-linked companies have entered into security and army assistance contracts with the Central African Republic and Mali governments (Sauer, 2023). These countries have been pulled closer into Russia's sphere of influence, causing concern for their former colonial power France (Sauer, 2023). Consequently, if Wagner were to withdraw it would create new uncertainties for African governments reliant on the group for security and could complicate Moscow's geopolitical influence in the region (Sauer, 2023).

Wagner's involvement in Sudan, amidst an ongoing civil war, has also been significant (Sheludkova, 2023). The suspension of Wagner's operations in Africa could have financial repercussions as the group has capitalised on exploiting natural resources on the continent (Al-Jazeera, 2023). However, some argue that Wagner's influence abroad could prevent its complete isolation from the Russian government (Al-Jazeera, 2023). Furthermore, Russia relies on the Wagner Group for its actions in Ukraine and for carrying out its foreign policy objectives in the above-mentioned countries, for instance, Libya and Syria (Al-Jazeera, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Wagner mutiny has emerged as a formidable challenge to the Putin regime, highlighting the vulnerabilities within Russia's military and security apparatus. However, the implications of this failed coup attempt extend beyond internal stability, casting doubts on the country's future trajectory. Moreover, the mutiny's repercussions on the ongoing war in Ukraine and Wagner's presence in Africa further complicate the situation.

As Russia navigates these complex dynamics, domestically and on the international stage, the aftermath of the Wagner mutiny will continue to shape the country's internal dynamics and relationships with other nations. This event raises two questions: when did Putin realise that invading Ukraine has been detrimental to the domestic and foreign status of Russia? And how much time is left until the population understands this and further opposition is mobilised?

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