

Research Briefing

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Instability in Russia: Prigozhin's armed rebellion

Introduction

Infighting between Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the mercenary Wagner Group, and the Russian military leadership over the conduct of the military campaign in Ukraine, has been threatening to spill over into the political realm for some time.¹

That public feud escalated in mid-June 2023, seemingly in response to [efforts by the Russian Defence Ministry to bring the Wagner Group under its control](#), after Prigozhin openly questioned the justification for the invasion of Ukraine.

Saying that Ukraine had never threatened to attack Russia, Prigozhin accused Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov of using the conflict to gain power and influence. In the process he insinuated that President Putin had been manipulated and the Russian people were being lied to about the rationale for the invasion.²

An attack on Wagner Group forces on 23 June 2023, allegedly by the Russian military, and the failure of the Russian military leadership to meet his

¹ The Wagner Group is a private military company with close ties to the Russian state. It first deployed to Ukraine in 2014 in support of separatist forces in the Donbas and has operations in Syria and several African countries, including Mali. Wagner redeployed to Ukraine in 2022 in support of Russian military forces.

² [“Wagner chief says Ukraine never threatened to attack Russia”](#), Euronews, 23 June 2023 and [“Wagner chief accuses Moscow of lying to public about Ukraine”](#), The Guardian, 23 June 2023

demands prompted Prigozhin to declare a “march for justice”.³ Over the next 24 hours Wagner group forces took control of the southern Russian city of Rostov on Don, across the border from Ukraine, and then proceeded to head north towards Moscow. At the time, Prigozhin’s intentions were unclear.

President Putin initially condemned Prigozhin’s actions as treasonous and said they would “inevitably be punished”.⁴ However, less than 12 hours later a deal was struck with Prigozhin, brokered by the Belarusian President, Alexandr Lukashenko. Prigozhin pulled back his forces, claiming that he didn’t want bloodshed,⁵ although it is considered more likely that he sought but failed to win military support for his armed rebellion.⁶ He later went on say that Wagner forces wanted to “demonstrate our protest” and that the intention was not to overthrow the Russian government.⁷

Now the immediate crisis has been averted, attention has turned to what Yevgeny Prigozhin’s short lived mutiny against the Russian military leadership has demonstrated and what it may mean for President Putin personally.

What did the deal between the Kremlin and Prigozhin involve?

The exact terms of the deal mediated by Alexandr Lukashenko, and with apparent involvement by Putin’s Chief of Staff Anton Vaino, are unclear.⁸

Despite President Putin labelling the actions of the Wagner Group as treason, neither Prigozhin nor the fighters involved will face criminal charges. Prigozhin has left the country for Belarus. It is uncertain what else the deal involved or whether any financial or other incentives were offered to Prigozhin.

The future of the Wagner Group, and Prigozhin’s own personal future, remains uncertain. In an address on 26 June 2023, President Putin said that Wagner fighters wishing to continue their service could sign contracts either with the Russian Ministry of Defence or another law enforcement or security agency. Equally, he promised that they would be allowed to return home or go to Belarus.⁹

On the role of Wagner more broadly, in an interview with RT, Russia’s state-controlled news channel, on 26 June Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov,

³ [“Russian mercenary leader Prigozhin: this is a ‘march for justice’”](#), Reuters, 23 June 2023

⁴ President of Russia, [Address to citizens of Russia](#), 24 June 2023

⁵ [“Wagner warlord Prigozhin resurfaces to justify mutiny against Putin”](#), Politico, 26 June 2023

⁶ Lawrence Freedman, [“That was the coup that was”](#), Comment is Freed, 26 June 2023

⁷ [“Wagner warlord Prigozhin resurfaces to justify mutiny against Putin”](#), Politico, 26 June 2023

⁸ Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 25 June 2023

⁹ President of Russia, [Address to citizens of Russia](#), 26 June 2023

said that Wagner's activities in Mali and the Central African Republic would continue.¹⁰

What does this mean for President Putin's authority?

Political unrest in Russia has been considered a possible, unintended consequence of President Putin's invasion of Ukraine. More so as time passes, and Russia's military campaign fails to yield decisive results.

Prigozhin's attempt at rebellion, the speed at which he achieved it, and the subsequent climbdown in the Kremlin's response to the situation, suggests that President Putin's hold on power is more precarious than the image that is portrayed. Recent events have been called an "unprecedented challenge to Putin's rule", since he assumed power in 2000.¹¹

With a presidential election expected in 2024, thoughts will undoubtedly turn to President Putin's future, how competing powerful factions within the Kremlin and Russia's security services may respond, albeit not publicly, or whether Prigozhin's insurrection, and the welcome he received from the Russian public along the way, may lead to further instability.¹²

Several commentators have sought to compare recent events with [the attempted coup in August 1991 against then President Mikhail Gorbachev](#) which, while unsuccessful at the time, eventually led to the fall of the Soviet Union.¹³

How is Putin likely to respond?

[Perceived to be humiliated and weakened](#). President Putin is unlikely to let this situation go unpunished, despite the terms of any deal.

The long-term fate of Yevgeny Prigozhin is open to question as is the future of Defence Minister Shoigu and General Valery Gerasimov. Some analysts

¹⁰ ["Wagner will continue Mali, C. Africa operations – Lavrov"](#), The Moscow Times, 26 June 2023. See also Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Foreign Minister Lavrov's interview with RT television](#), 26 June 2023 (awaiting a full English translation)

¹¹ ["Prigozhin's armed rebellion will have lasting consequences for Russia, Putin and the Ukraine war"](#), The Moscow Times, 24 June 2023

¹² See ["Putinism's demise will be chaotic and violent"](#), Politico, 26 June 2023 and ["Putin has limited options after the Prigozhin mutiny"](#), Chatham House Expert Comment, 26 June 2023

¹³ ["Prigozhin's Wagner mutiny is over: What now?"](#), Politico, 26 June 2023

consider movement within the Russian Ministry of Defence to be inevitable,¹⁴ although this would also hand Prigozhin the outcome he initially desired.

Increased paranoia and uncertainty over who is to be trusted within President Putin's inner circle is considered inevitable.¹⁵

Many also fear that in an effort to reassert his authority, President Putin may respond by imposing more repressive policies domestically.¹⁶

How do Prigozhin's actions affect the conflict in Ukraine?

While morale boosting for the Ukrainians, this latest crisis for President Putin is unlikely to change much about the state of the war.

Russian military positions in the south and east of Ukraine are well entrenched and Ukraine's counteroffensive will still have to address that military challenge.

Wagner's role as an organisation on the frontline in Ukraine is considered over. Wagner fighters are however likely to be integrated into the Russian military, allowing Russia to retain on the battlefield what has proven to be a relatively effective fighting force.¹⁷

What has the international response been?

US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, has called recent events "a direct challenge to Putin's authority" which "raises profound questions", but that it was also "an internal matter for the Russians to figure out".¹⁸

Speaking to reporters on 26 June 2023, NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, said that events were an internal Russian matter but NATO was monitoring the situation.¹⁹ He said: "we see the weakness of the Russian regime and it also demonstrates how difficult and dangerous it is for President Putin to be relying on mercenaries."

¹⁴ Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 25 June 2023

¹⁵ Lawrence Freedman, "[That was the coup that was](#)", Comment is Freed, 26 June 2023

¹⁶ "[The mutiny in Russia may be over, but it still damages Putin](#)", NPR, 25 June 2023

¹⁷ Institute for the Study of War, [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#), 26 June 2023

¹⁸ US Department of State, [Secretary Blinken with Margaret Brennan of CBS Face the Nation](#), 25 June 2023

¹⁹ NATO, [Press release](#), 26 June 2023

The Ministry of Defence has called the weekend's events "the most significant challenge to the Russian state in recent times".²⁰ In a statement to the House of Commons on 26 June, Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said the rebellion was an "unprecedented challenge" to President Putin:

The Government, of course, consider that this is an internal Russian affair and that the leadership of Russia is a matter exclusively for the Russian people, but everybody should note that one of Putin's protégés has publicly destroyed his case for the war in Ukraine [...]

Prigozhin's rebellion is an unprecedented challenge to President Putin's authority and it is clear that cracks are emerging in Russian support for the war.²¹

China has expressed its support for Russia and called the situation with the Wagner Group an "incident" which is "Russia's internal affair".²²

How will this affect the July NATO summit?

The NATO summit will take place from 11-12 July in Vilnius, Lithuania

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda has already said that NATO will need to strengthen its eastern flank following the events involving the Wagner Group in Russia:

If Prigozhin or part of the Wagner group ends up in Belarus with unclear plans and unclear intentions, it will only mean that we need to further strengthen the security of our eastern borders. I am not only talking about Lithuania here, but without a doubt the whole of NATO.²³

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance is monitoring the situation. He described [Russia's recent announcement of deploying its tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus](#) as "reckless and irresponsible".²⁴

NATO has expanded its military presence along its eastern flank in recent years in response to Russia's actions. In June, defence ministers agreed to further bolster NATO's defence posture, with new regional plans "with assigned forces and capabilities, and high levels of readiness".²⁵

²⁰ Ministry of Defence (@DefenceHQ), [Twitter](#), 24 June 2023, [accessed 27 June 2023]

²¹ HC Deb 26 June 2023, c37-8

²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Regular press conference](#), 26 June 2023

²³ Lithuania Urges Beefed-Up NATO if Wagner's Prigozhin in Belarus, AFP via Voice of America, 25 June 2023

²⁴ NATO, [Secretary General thanks Lithuania for contributions to NATO, hosting upcoming Vilnius Summit](#), 26 June 2023

²⁵ NATO, [Secretary General praises Germany's contributions to NATO](#), 19 June 2023

Jens Stoltenberg said NATO will have over 300,000 troops on high readiness “to defend every inch of Allied territory against any threat”.²⁶

What support is there for British nationals in Russia?

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) continues to advise against all travel to the whole of Russia.²⁷

On 25 June 2023 the FCDO updated its travel advice to warn of the “lack of available flight options to return to the UK.” It is not possible to fly directly to the UK, or via EU countries, from Russia. Connecting flights, largely via the Middle East, Serbia and Turkey, are one option.

The FCDO also strongly advise individuals to consider leaving by the remaining commercial routes if their presence in Russia is not essential. The FCDO warns that consular support “is also severely limited where the FCDO advises against travel.”

Several Russian travel companies, including Aeroflot and Russian Railways, have been sanctioned by the UK. However, the FCDO says that “for journeys originating in, or within, Russia, British nationals may purchase tickets from these companies without breaching UK sanctions.”

In his statement to the House of Commons on 26 June the Foreign Secretary made clear that any extraction operation of British nationals would be “severely limited”:

Because of the situation in Russia and the conflict, the UK’s ability to conduct an extraction operation as we did in Sudan would be severely limited, probably to the point of impossibility. I reiterate our travel advice: British nationals should consider leaving the country by commercial routes unless their presence is absolutely essential.²⁸

Further information is available from the [FCDO foreign travel advice on Russia](#) page. The situation is fluid and this information should be considered correct at the time of writing (27 June 2023).

²⁶ NATO, [NATO Defence Ministers conclude two days of meetings, pledging increased support for Ukraine](#), 16 June 2023

²⁷ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development office, [Travel Advice to Russia](#)

²⁸ [HC Deb 26 June 2023](#), c42

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