

THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



FY23 SCSS#10, 26 June 2023 *“Russia’s Coup D’état - Nature and Implications”*

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Introduction

On Saturday 24 June at 02:00 CEST Yevgeniy Prigozhin announces that his fighters crossed the Ukraine-Russia border from Luhansk to the Rostov region, with border guards subordinated to the FSB embracing his men. By 05:00 CEST Wagner fighters surround the HQ of the Southern Military District in Rostov-on-Don, a city of one million, as well as the local FSB HQ. At 10:00 CEST in a televised address, Putin describes the actions of Prigozhin’s Wagner PMC as “armed rebellion,” “treason,” and “a stab in the back,” and alludes to 1917 rebellion, the Bolshevik revolution, and Russia’s 5-year civil war. Lt Gen Vladimir Alexeyev, first deputy head of the General Staff’s main directorate (GRU’s Wagner PMC handler), calls Prigozhin’s actions a “state coup d’état.”

At 10:19 CEST, Prigozhin responded on Telegram messaging service: “Regarding treason, the president is deeply mistaken. We are patriots of our homeland. We have fought, and we continue to fight, all PMC Wagner fighters. And nobody is going to surrender at the request of the president, the FSB [Federal Security Service], or anyone else. Because we do not want the country to continue to live in corruption, in deceit, and in bureaucracy.”

By 11:42 CEST authorities reported fighting in the Voronezh region as military facilities were occupied by Wagner PMC troops, an estimated 4-5000 (brigade-size) of whom had “marched” north, in a convoy of 450 vehicles. Wagner PMC air defense units shoot down 5 Russian helicopters and an Il-18 reconnaissance plane, killing 13-15 Russian military aviators. By 18:45 Wagner mercenaries are in the Lipetsk region, about 400 kilometers from Moscow, and Moscow orders the destruction of bridges over the River Oka, which would complicate and slow Wagner PMC advances.

At 20:15 CEST, President Lukashenka’s press service reports that Prigozhin has been persuaded to “return to base.” At 20:25 Prigozhin confirms in a voice message that he has halted the advance within 200 km of Moscow: “They wanted to dissolve Wagner Group. On June 23, we set off on our ‘march of justice.’ In the span of 24 hours, we got within 200 kilometers of

Moscow. During that time, not a single drop of our fighters' blood was shed. Now we've reached the moment where bloodshed is possible. So, understanding the full responsibility for the potential shedding of Russian blood from either side, we're turning our columns around and heading back in the opposite direction towards our field camps, according to plan." By 23:00, the presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov announces that the criminal case opened by the FSB against Prigozhin would be dropped, Wagnerites have immunity from prosecution, and Prigozhin will go to Belarus.

Nature, Timing and Motivations?

Hitherto, one dominant understanding of the role of Wagner PMC, a Russian state-constructed entity led by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, was that Prigozhin himself had an "attack dog" function for Putin, in that he can check-and-balance centers of power in the Russia's MoD and General Staff that could threaten the presidency. In this understanding, Prigozhin was without agency, entirely Putin-dependent, unable to act autonomously. Indeed, Wagner PMC had an "ace in the hole" role for Putin as the last bastion of regime defense.

Prigozhin's growing criticism of the General Staff and Ministry of Defense was long-standing. However, after a short-lived "ceasefire" in November 2022, Prigozhin's criticism grew in line with the threat of Wagner PMC subordination to the MoD. On June 22 and 23, Prigozhin criticized the "genocidal" actions of Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief-of-the-General Staff Gerasimov and claimed stunning battlefield breakthroughs as a result of Ukraine's counter-offensive successes. On Friday June 23, 22:00-23:00 CEST Prigozhin alleges Wagner PMC camps in Ukraine were attacked by the Russian military with rockets, artillery, and helicopters, and many Wagner fighters were killed (the video evidence was less than compelling). The Russian MoD denied responsibility for the attack, claiming it as a Prigozhin provocation. Prigozhin then states that Wagner PMC's alleged 25,000 troops (other assessments put the real figure as closer to 10,000) will initiate a "march of justice" to find the culprits: "Anyone who tries to resist us, we will consider him a threat and kill him immediately."

One reading is that Russian Defense Minister Shoigu's pressure on Prigozhin to subordinate Wagner PMC to Russia's MoD was the proximate cause. By June 2023, Wagner prison recruitment pool on 6-month contracts had ended and Prigozhin withdrew Wagner PMC from the front line in Ukraine. At the same time, the MoD had announced that all PMCs, including Wagner, were to be subordinated to the MoD and that all PMC fighters had to sign contracts with the MoD by July 1. At this point, Prigozhin became the proverbial "cornered rat." The withdrawal of Wagner PMC from Ukraine reduced Prigozhin's leverage in negotiations over subordination and strengthened Shoigu's. Subordination became a growing reality: Russia's MoD would control Wagner financial flows, military hardware, and deployment.

Some have seen evidence of a wider conspiracy. Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, albeit not a disinterested observer, argues the Prigozhin "riot" was linked to Putin power transition: "A category of people has appeared in Russia which considers Putin's actions lethally dangerous to its interests and existence. This group includes law enforcers, civil servants, and representatives of oligarchic clans. Prigozhin's "lightning march" on Moscow was "a demonstration of the strength of their intentions and possibilities, setting up conditions for the beginning of a transition of power." There is very little evidence for

this claim that Prigozhin was not acting alone. What “evidence” there is in support of this proposition is indirect and circumstantial: Prigozhin, so critical of all Russian power structures, does not criticize the FSB and the FSB appeared to green-light Wagner’s border crossover into Rostov region. But just as likely an explanation for the shocking and discrediting lack of prior warning is the sheer incompetence of the FSB. The inaction of local forces might be explained by an unwillingness to confront Wagner without clear instructions from the center.

Beyond proximate causes, the mutiny was also a symptom of wider systemic failure. Late Putinism is characterized by a generalized frustration in its sclerotic nature and the lack of advancement. Systemic institutional avenues for advancement, such as elections and the rule of law are controlled by insiders. For semi-outsiders, such as Prigozhin, who not only wanted to avoid subordination but also wished elevation within the Putin system (to be recognized for his military competence and his ability to generate combat capability), the war has not been the opportunity he hoped to enter the ranks of first tier players and be perceived of as a powerful relevant and strategic player.

However, Prigozhin’s “march on Moscow” demonstrated that while there was no overt spontaneous outpouring of public support for Putin and his regime, the same held true for Prigozhin - at least within elites. Prigozhin has a personality (outright criminal psychopath) unlike mainstream figures in Russia’s oligarchy, siloviki, and technocratic-managerial and bureaucratic elites. In addition, Putin had made overt support for Prigozhin “treachery” when he characterized Prigozhin as a “traitor.” Nevertheless, Prigozhin showed some ability to carve out agency for himself, cultivating a niche as a conservative nationalist anti-elite patriot. Some signs of grassroots support for Wagner suggest there is a demand for a populist nationalist figure in the Russian system.

Putin’s personalistic regime is losing the personality at the center, “Putin’s Russia” becomes “leaderless Russia.” Few actors privilege military coup over a negotiated transition process, but some expressions of support for Putin seemed half-hearted. The relative silence of the pro-Putin elite might be interpreted as an overt withdrawal of support for Putin; silence and passivity speak volumes. It suggests that substantial parts of the Russian elite are unhappy with prospect of Putin’s forever war (“Russia can’t win; Ukraine can’t lose”) and move to DPRK-lite and so seek a negotiated transition. Others might want a more vigorous and effective prosecution of the war. Possibly both camps now find Putin less of an asset than a liability. If this understanding has purchase, then Russian elite behavior in June 2023 becomes the polar oppose of behavior at the Emergency Session of the Security Council on February 21, 2022, when Putin publicly coerced the 25 Security Council members into supporting the invasion, ensuring their complicity, binding them to Putin and notably, humiliating SVR head Sergei Naryshkin in the process. Their deafening silence on June 24, 2023, also sought to absolve them of that complicity.

But perhaps many figures were just too busy to be putting out press-releases. Or can we just assume the centralized and sclerotic systems can become paralyzed in unexpected crisis contexts and, in such situations, constructive ambiguity rules, and so it is entirely rational and prudent for pro-regime actors to stay silent or declare support for “the president” without defining which “P” they support: “The king is dead, long live the king!” On balance, in this particular crisis as opposed to “normal politics,” the silence of the Security Council in affirming Putin’s primacy

after Putin’s apocalyptic address is remarkable. This must be a concern for a paranoid Putin and now fear of his conclusions will almost certainly induce greater paralysis in decision-making structures.

The timing of the termination of the march on Moscow is compatible with at least three possible understandings, which only subsequent events can validate. First, Prigozhin *prima facie* is clearly delusional, frustrated, and emotional, not rational. After all, who else would have marched on Moscow with only a brigade (4000 troops), hoping to subjugate a country of 150 million people? He terminates when he realizes his exposure and threats to his family. Second, Prigozhin understood the “march” from the outset in terms of coercive leverage and negotiations – a “better to travel hopefully than to arrive” approach - and so ended negotiations when he was at “peak Prigozhin” in terms of negotiated gains. These “gains” would become apparent were Shoigu and Gerasimov to be replaced by Prigozhin-compatible successors, such as Gen Surovikin and Tula Governor Dyumin. Third, Prigozhin terminates the march 200 km from Moscow when it is apparent to him that his putative backers had lost their nerve and had withdrawn support, or expected supporters had not flocked to his flag. Prigozhin had lost a major part of his leverage. Fourth, perhaps he felt pushed into a corner, with Wagner being disbanded and perhaps facing arrest: with nothing to lose, a high-stakes gamble might just pay off.

Implications for Ukraine and Beyond?

Wagner PMC is no longer a fighting force in Ukraine and the morale of regular Russian occupation troops may decline further; their faith and trust in their command structures seriously eroded if not outright undermined. The extent of this effect will only become fully apparent when Ukrainian troops successfully navigate the minefields and fixed fortifications and breach Russian trench lines. This time period is critical, as the longer this takes, the greater the opportunity of Russian troops to regain their morale.

Shoigu’s position is strengthened. He may well have pushed Prigozhin to act prematurely, fail in his objectives (partially or fully), and so preventing Putin from sacking Shoigu as it appears he acquiesces to Prigozhin’s demands. At the same time, Shoigu rebalances the reputation and standing the Russian military compared to the FSB, *Rosgvardiya* and, of course, Wagner PMC. If this is the case, Shoigu attains reflexive control over Putin and demonstrates his mastery of elite institutional politics. In addition, from Putin’s perspective, pulling out Wagner before any Ukrainian “wins” could be more beneficial than pulling them out in the context of sudden and rapid Ukraine military advances.

In retrospect, the military mutiny may be viewed as a missed opportunity for Ukraine to push the counter-offensive harder, though the dictum of not interrupting your adversary when they make mistakes also holds. Time will tell. If Russian armed forces can hold the line through the summer in the face of Ukraine’s determined counter-offensive, Russia’s MoD will be strengthened within the system. If Prigozhin does not suffer the ubiquitous “9 mm headache,” then Prigozhin may well stimulate additional challengers to destabilize Russia and so undercut Russian military effectiveness.

Will association with Russia be questioned in the Global South, though Russia’s relations here are primarily transactional and short-term, despite Russian narratives of being in the vanguard of

an anti-western colonial struggle to facilitate the move from US hegemony/unipolarity to multipolarity/global justice? Or is Putin now understood to be what he is: just another aging authoritarian leader, increasingly less powerful, rising risks of association, and the need to hedge. China is key and their assessment of Russian underlying systemic vulnerabilities and their pragmatic understanding of probable direction of travel critical. The impact of the coup on Wagner operations overseas is a consideration-in progress.

Conclusion

SCSS#10 in effect asks: how brittle is late Putin Russia? How frustrated and fed up are the elites and rank and file and middle managers of power structures? If Prigozhin had backers, what were their objectives? To coerce Putin to stand down from “running” for the presidency for his “first term” in 2024? Or are we in the realm of classic Zugzwang and so indecisive continuity, with only limited purge-as-retirement. Alternatively, might a supposedly weakened Putin become stronger in the short term, through purges, mobilization of patriotism to eliminate traitors, if not full mobilization and martial law? Putin may seek to balance the risks of disruption with now the necessity of generational change to back fill purged cadres - upward mobility acts as safety valve – and this resets order, but on a lower and more precarious stability plateau.

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