



Q&A

Published 29 June 2022

By International Crisis Group

Assessing the Wagner Group's Aborted Run on Moscow: What Comes Next?

On 24 June, President Vladimir Putin faced his biggest challenge in over two decades at Russia's helm: a mutiny by a mercenary group fighting alongside Russian forces in Ukraine. In this Q&A, Crisis Group experts explore the implications for Putin's rule and Russian foreign policy.

What happened?

On 24 June, mercenaries belonging to the Wagner Group, a private military company founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, advanced to within less than 200km from Moscow before turning back. It was an enormous shock to the nation – one that has left Russians of every stripe and the Kremlin reeling.

For one thing, the challenge came from an unexpected quarter. Prigozhin owed his fortune to Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the president has relied on him for some of his dirtiest and toughest fights. Perhaps even more surprising was just how swiftly Wagner was able to seize ground and mount an apparent run on the Kremlin. Prigozhin threw down the gauntlet in a Telegram post on the evening of 23 June. By the next morning, the group's forces had taken control of the defence ministry's headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, a city of a million people and a main staging ground for Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine, and a column was rumbling through Voronezh, another major regional city, headed toward Moscow. The Wagner forces downed six helicopters and an Ilyushin IL 22M plane, killing at least thirteen people, but faced virtually no resistance on the ground.

Prigozhin vaingloriously called it a "march for justice". He claimed his blitz was the culmination of a drawn-out feud with Russia's top military brass, whom he has long claimed are not doing enough for the war effort. This time, however, he went further – accusing them of misleading the president about the basis for the war and how it has unfolded. If he was expecting Putin to take his side, however, that was not on the cards. Putin clearly saw Prigozhin's power play as a threat to his leadership, dubbing it a "mutiny" and a "betrayal". The Russian leader's angry televised speech on the morning of 24 June contrasted starkly with his carefully curated, confident appearances since launching Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In it, Putin vowed that those involved would be punished.

By all accounts, Prigozhin and the Kremlin were locked in a high-stakes negotiation up until the point of no return – when Wagner's troops were poised to enter Moscow, where security forces had reportedly set up defences. They cut a deal to head off a worse crisis. The Kremlin announced on the evening of 24 June that Putin's ally, Belarussian President Aleksandr Lukashenka, had brokered an agreement under which Prigozhin won amnesty for Wagner



Wagner mercenary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin leaves the headquarters of the Southern Military District amid the group's pullout from the city of Rostov-on-Don, Russia, 24 June 2023. REUTERS / ALEXANDER ERMOCHENKO

personnel who had joined the insurrection, the opportunity to join the regular army for those who had not and exile for himself to Belarus.

The Kremlin's account of the deal left more questions than answers. Whatever Putin's motives, giving Lukashenka credit for saving the day strains credulity and would seem an embarrassing narrative for the Russian leader. It suggests a level of weakness and lack of options on the latter's part. It may never be clear who actually brokered the deal or what kind of threats were paired with the ostensible reprieve Prigozhin was granted. In a sign of one possible lever Putin held over Prigozhin, in the wake of the upheaval the Russian president admitted for the first time that the state had long been funding Wagner and hinted that the group may have misappropriated money. It seems difficult to fathom that, with Putin's track record of silencing his enemies, anyone he has branded a traitor will be able to live out their days in peace. But it is also possible that the Kremlin may value or fear Prigozhin and

his fighters sufficiently to let them survive. On 27 June, Lukashenka confirmed that Prigozhin was in Belarus but that Wagner's mercenaries are still at their bases in Russia and Russian-controlled territory in Ukraine.

What spurred Prigozhin to take such dramatic action?

Prigozhin said his goal was to prevent Wagner's disbanding: revealing his actions as those of a man cornered, gambling it all. Prigozhin had been sparring publicly (and increasingly belligerently) with Russia's military leadership for months, claiming that they had provided Wagner with insufficient weaponry and were incompetent in their planning and operations. He may have hoped to convince Putin – who had been silent during the months of infighting – to back him against Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Russia's top general, Valery Gerasimov. It was a fight he was losing: a 1 July deadline loomed on a new defence ministry order, signed by Putin, requiring all

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volunteers (that is, fighters not already affiliated with government forces) to sign contracts with the military. This order would have essentially folded Wagner into the army’s regular chain of command.

On the evening of his uprising, Prigozhin said he was spurred to take control of Rostov after Russian missiles struck a Wagner base in Russian-occupied Ukraine. But it is unlikely that an operation on the scale of the 23 June march was planned in a day. Questions linger about how such a shrewd court navigator was pushed to such extreme action: did he lose Putin’s ear? Did he feel he had support from other quarters? Did he harbour bigger ambitions?

How did Prigozhin morph from Putin’s fixer into his biggest problem?

Over the last ten years, Prigozhin – a petty criminal turned successful caterer under Putin’s patronage (earning him the nickname “Putin’s chef”) – has transformed himself into the go-to person for operations that the Kremlin preferred to disavow. In 2013, he ran the Internet Research Agency, a so-called troll farm based in St. Petersburg that employed hundreds of people to engage in influence operations online, including in the United States in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Then, in 2014, when Russia occupied Crimea and sponsored a revolt in eastern Ukraine, fighters under his command – the precursor to Wagner – battled the Ukrainian army while the Kremlin denied involvement.

The Wagner Group came into its own over the course of Russia’s military intervention in Syria starting in 2015. There again, as Putin sought to avoid an unpopular deployment of Russian soldiers that risked evoking the Soviet Union’s bloody, ignominious war in Afghanistan, Moscow relied on Wagner’s ground forces to fight alongside Syrian and Iranian troops on the Syrian regime’s behalf, supported by a Russian air campaign. As Russia sought to expand

its influence in Africa, Wagner contracted its services to autocrats facing down rebellion and other opposition in the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, Mozambique and Sudan, sometimes accepting stakes in mines and other businesses as payment.

But nowhere was Prigozhin clearer in demonstrating his utility to Putin than during the most recent phase of operations in Ukraine. As the regular Russian army met stiff Ukrainian resistance, dashing the Kremlin’s expectations of a quick “special military operation” to topple the government in Kyiv, Wagner entered the scene, quickly earning a reputation for tenacity and barbarity. Recruiting widely, including from among convicts, Prigozhin took the lead in the most grinding battle to date, for the Ukrainian town of Bakhmut. The town eventually succumbed to Russian control, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives and Bakhmut’s utter devastation.

As Prigozhin’s importance to the Russian war effort grew, so did his public profile. Prigozhin has both cultivated and exploited his notoriety, bypassing state-controlled media to reach Russians on social media. With unvarnished tirades accusing the Russian military of incompetence and corruption, Prigozhin built his own brand as a patriot. In so doing, he became the face of a new faction in Russia, the so-called party of war, who blame the military’s lack of stomach for a full-fledged fight, including martial law and widespread mobilisation, for Russia becoming bogged down in Ukraine. By arguing not for peace, but for more forceful action in the face of Russia’s military setbacks in Ukraine, he staked out a position to the right of Putin.

What are the implications for Putin’s grip on power in Russia?

Putin and his propagandists will be hard pressed to turn the Wagner uprising to his advantage. While the failure of Russia’s military to secure a

quick victory in Ukraine eroded the perception of its strength, this crisis has raised questions about the very stability of Putin's rule.

One of the pillars of this stability is Putin's presumed control of Russia's strongmen and oligarchs, even as they compete for his czar-like favour. The scale of Prigozhin's challenge seems both to shatter that narrative and to underscore the difficulties of governing Russia through a matrix of ad hoc, non-transparent and highly personal relationships. Indeed, the Kremlin's longstanding acceptance of Prigozhin's verbal attacks on the regular army (something few others could have gotten away with) may be part of the reason the Russian security system failed to predict Wagner's insurrection. It may also have contributed to the security forces' failure to do much to prevent Prigozhin's men from thundering toward the capital. Perhaps some were unsure, even after Putin's 24 June statement, that Prigozhin was not somehow still operating under Kremlin orders.

Perhaps even more concerning for Putin are the alternative explanations. Some Russian troops may have been supportive of Wagner's project or frustrated enough with the system to welcome anyone seeming to defy it. Russian security services were aware of Prigozhin's plans, according to *The New York Times*, which cited U.S. intelligence sources. If so, those in the know may have discounted the plans as unlikely to come to fruition, but some may have been complicit. In a sign that support for Prigozhin may have been broader than his own mercenaries, Russia has reportedly detained the military's air and space force commander, Sergei Surovikin. None of this bodes well for Putin or the Kremlin.

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As long as Prigozhin was seen as the Kremlin's man, his growing popularity arguably bolstered Putin's. Prigozhin's macho, profanity-laced image-making took a page from Putin's own playbook. When he first came into the limelight, Putin's swagger – he famously threatened to kill terrorists in “outhouses” – had wide appeal. The president fashioned a persona as a tough-talking man of the people. But more than two decades on, in contrast to Prigozhin, Putin appears out of touch. Critics have disparaged him as a grandpa hiding in a bunker, while Prigozhin appears in social media videos alongside his soldiers, backlit by the horrors of war. In one case he is standing in a field of corpses.

How Putin responds in the coming days and weeks to this challenge may prove pivotal for his grip on power. More than any other event since 2012, when he reclaimed the Kremlin from Dmitry Medvedev's placeholder presidency, the past week's chaotic events have focused minds on who and what might follow him should he relinquish his role. Russian social media channels were rife with rumours as the political elite grappled with the possible fallout. This chatter even included speculation that Putin might not stand or might designate a successor ahead of the 2024 presidential election (a prospect suggested by a figure as prominent as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* editor-in-chief Konstantin Remchukov).

The days following the end of Prigozhin's march saw the Kremlin engaged in damage control. After Putin's 24 June speech, and no doubt at the Kremlin's behest, regional leaders recorded messages of support. In a televised appearance in Red Square before his security forces, Putin tried to project strength, thanking the military for heroically halting a civil war – though it is unclear that they did much, if anything, toward that end. He also warned of consequences for officials who had helped Prigozhin enrich himself at Russia's expense.

As for what lies ahead, Putin could well pursue a mix of coercive measures intended to ensure the loyalty of Russia's political and security elite (such as Surovikin's reported

detention, if true) and personnel changes. Replacements in the defence ministry's upper echelons would be an obvious way for Putin to at least appear to address security failings and a darkening public mood. Wagner's rebellion put military shortcomings front and centre. Since May, the Russian public has been anxiously watching the war come ever closer to home. Manifestations include incursions across the border from Ukraine, a drone attack on the Kremlin and Ukrainian artillery fire forcing the evacuation of Shebekino, a town of 40,000. Against this backdrop, one rumour circulating in Moscow holds that Alexei Dyumin, the head of the Tula region who was once Putin's bodyguard and then a deputy defence minister, could succeed Shoigu as defence minister. Thus far, however, the palace intrigue has remained opaque to outsiders. While Shoigu appeared at a meeting Putin held with his top brass on Tuesday, General Gerasimov has not been seen in public since the mutiny.

The challenge Putin is facing highlights the risks that a long war of attrition with Ukraine poses to his rule. But that is unlikely to mean that Putin will suddenly sue for peace. The president has staked his reputation on winning this conflict and has shown no sign – despite the high casualty counts and economic costs – of backing down from his goal of subjugating Ukraine. That the challenge cannot easily be blamed on Western meddling, but instead emanates from voices even more hawkish than his own, will play into his calculations. The higher probability is that he instead doubles down on military victory, veering onto a more radical path ironically charted by Prigozhin and others in the so-called party of war.

How will these events affect Russian external relations and power projection?

As Putin faced the toughest challenge to his rule yet, few friends and allies reached out to offer support. Indeed, the attitude among partners and adversaries alike was mainly to stay out of the fray.

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The slow trickle of outreach to the Kremlin from world leaders shows a Putin perhaps more isolated than before, at least during his momentary loss of control. From among the neighbours that once formed part of the Soviet Union, he spoke only with the heads of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as well as Belarus' Lukashenka. Farther afield, only Türkiye, Iran and Qatar extended offers of support to the Kremlin as events unfolded. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said he was ready to help seek a “peaceful resolution” and spoke of the importance of “acting with common sense”. Notably, China – which Putin has increasingly relied on as a trade partner and ally in the UN Security Council – waited until Prigozhin had turned his men around to weigh in. Eventually, Beijing reaffirmed its support for Russia as a “friendly neighbour and comprehensive strategic partner”. But even then, the outreach did not come from Chinese President Xi Jinping, who had not spoken with Putin at the time of writing.

It all suggests that the Kremlin will feel more pressure than ever to maintain influence in what it views as its backyard and to deal on an equal footing with key trade and political partners, namely China and Türkiye. Despite the swiftness with which the Kremlin averted a larger upheaval, the uprising will have planted seeds of doubt about Russia's future and encourage more hedging in global affairs. That said, any foreign policy shifts are likely to be slow and subtle. Countries which have maintained trade and political ties with Russia, despite Western efforts to peel off support for Putin, have their reasons for doing so and are unlikely to shift policies in a day.

Amid the turmoil, Ukraine's Western backers kept quiet to avoid giving Moscow cause

to claim they were involved. In the aftermath, however, they were more forthcoming. U.S. President Joe Biden told the press that Putin had become a “bit of a pariah” and had been weakened by the clash with Wagner. European leaders, from German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg, said the events had exposed the fissures in Putin’s grip on power. Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas went a step further, saying they showed cracks in Russia’s resolve in its war with Ukraine. But Western leaders were still trying to parse the implications as they met for an EU summit in Brussels on 29 June.

What next for Wagner?

With Wagner’s future hanging in the balance, so, too, is its role as an instrument of Russian power in the far-flung regions where it operates. The exodus of Prigozhin and those who may follow him to Belarus, coupled with the demand that the rest of Wagner go home or join the army, seems likely to be the death knell for Wagner’s engagement as an independent fighting force in Ukraine.

But it is unclear whether the same instructions will apply to Wagner forces in other conflict arenas. There, the group has been a channel for Russian power projection, including in resource-rich countries that have long suffered instability and where the influence of former colonial powers is on the wane. On 26 June, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Wagner’s actions in Russia will not affect its operations in Africa. He added that the work of Wagner’s “military instructors” in the Central African Republic and Mali (both of which rely heavily on the group as a security provider) will continue, perhaps from a new base in Belarus. But, in a sign that Moscow’s purges may reach further, on 27 June, the Saudi-owned news channel Al-Hadath reported that three

high-ranking Wagner Group commanders were detained at Syria’s Khmeimim air base, and that police visited Wagner headquarters in the cities of Damascus, Deir al-Zour and Hama.

How will the aftermath of Wagner’s rebellion affect Ukraine’s counteroffensive?

The timing of Prigozhin’s putsch could not have been better for Kyiv, as Ukrainian forces probe for vulnerabilities along the 1,000km front in their counteroffensive, launched in late May. Battle-weary troops, who have thus made only incremental progress, could only have welcomed news that some of the most vicious forces in the enemy’s ranks were facing off with their would-be brothers in arms on Russian soil.

There were other benefits for Ukraine besides. By calling into question Russia’s internal stability, Prigozhin’s march undermined the Kremlin’s narrative that it can easily outlast Ukraine’s military capacity and the will of Kyiv’s Western supporters. “Russia long masked its weaknesses with propaganda”, wrote President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Telegram. “But now the chaos has gotten too big to cover it in lies”. The Russian infighting also cast Ukraine’s costly, months-long defence of Bakhmut – a town of questionable strategic importance – in a more favourable light. Ukraine has said its largely symbolic stand would help exhaust Russia’s fighting strength. Now it seems also to have fuelled the internecine conflict between Wagner and the Russian military.

Ukraine will be hoping the turmoil translates into gaps in Russia’s deeply dug defensive lines, where Wagner forces played a critical role even after redeploying from Bakhmut to other sectors of the front, and corresponding opportunities to advance. Perhaps seeking to create the impression of momentum as events unfolded in Moscow, Ukrainian forces

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announced they had recaptured a tenth settlement from Russia and established a foothold on the Russian-controlled left bank of the Dnipro river across from the city of Kherson. Zelenskyy boasted on Telegram on the evening of 26 June that Ukrainian forces had advanced in all areas along the front.

Ukraine also will be seeking to capitalise on the humiliating episode for Putin in its efforts to drum up international support. Debates among Ukraine's Western backers on the future of their support for Ukraine will be at the top of the agenda as leaders meet at the NATO summit on 11-12 July. These countries will discuss how much they are willing to commit to Ukraine – and for how long – as the fighting rages. The allies are likely to be at least somewhat divided. Some, particularly Ukraine's strongest backers in the Baltic states and Poland, will argue that Putin's seeming retreat in the face of Prigozhin's threat makes the case for pushing harder. Others could highlight concerns about the risks of instability in Russia as a reason to eschew support that could lead to escalation.

Whether or not it bears on Western support under consideration, the prospect of escalation is real. Ukrainians now are likely to perceive that they have every reason to push and probe for further weakness on the Russian side – looking to see what gains they can make on the battlefield, as Russian soldiers absorb the past week's news, and hoping that Prigozhin's bold move fuels further unrest in Russia. At the same time, Putin, needing to repair his damaged reputation, may seek ways to up the temperature in Ukraine, for instance, ramping up missile attacks in an effort to demonstrate strength at home. If that happens, the recent turmoil in Russia could push the prospect of a negotiated solution even farther away than it was before.

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