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## The Prigozhin Rebellion: The Rise and Fall of Wagner and the Rebellion's Impact

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The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation having dragged on without a ceasefire, Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the Russian private military company Wagner Group (hereinafter referred to as "Wagner") that had been involved in the invasion from its early stages, led part of Wagner's forces in an armed rebellion on June 24, 2023. The rebel forces attempted to march on Moscow, sparking an extremely serious situation. They took control of the major southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don and the Defense Ministry facilities located there and then continued northward toward Moscow. However, in the face of the Russian government's response based on President Vladimir Putin's statement that traitors would be punished, as well as Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko's mediation and other factors, the rebels announced their withdrawal the following day (June 25). Although the worst-case scenario of armed conflict in Moscow had been averted, the repercussions of the one-day insurgency continue to spread throughout Russia and abroad.

This paper analyzes the events and motivations behind the "Prigozhin Rebellion," focusing on the birth and growth of Wagner and its successes and failures during the invasion of Ukraine. It then considers the implications of this sequence of events for the ongoing invasion and for President Vladimir Putin as he looks ahead to the Russian presidential election in 2024.

### 1. Wagner's origins

Wagner was founded in 2014 by Dmitry Utkin, a retired lieutenant colonel from the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) and previously a member of the Hong Kong-based private military company Slavonic Corps. Nevertheless, Prigozhin, an emerging

oligarch who ran a successful restaurant and catering business based on his relationship of trust with Putin, was so deeply involved in the company's establishment that he was considered the de facto founder.<sup>1</sup>

Given this background, Wagner since its inception has enjoyed strong ties with the Russian military, the Ministry of Defense, and the Putin administration, allowing it to operate semi-openly in Russia where private military companies are generally illegal.

Shortly after its establishment, Wagner participated in the annexation of Crimea by Russia that year and the subsequent fighting in eastern Ukraine, and later served as an unofficial representative of the Putin regime and Russian Federation forces in the Middle East and Africa, participating in combat and supporting local armed forces<sup>2</sup> and thereby extending its power across a wide range of locales and assignments.

In particular, Wagner's armed intervention in Syria in support of the Assad regime and its military advisory activities in African countries provided unofficial support for the Putin administration's foreign policy strategy. In addition, Wagner's activities in Syria reportedly gained it the acquaintance of Sergey Surovikin, then a local commander of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, while its activities in African countries brought Wagner its own financial resources and leverage through the securing of interests in mineral resources, etc.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The invasion of Ukraine and the rise and fall of Wagner

Since its establishment, Wagner has been active on numerous battlefields, especially in urban areas, and has been deployed to many fronts in the invasion of Ukraine because of its abundant experience in actual combat and its willingness to commit inhumane acts because it is not a regular army. Wagner initially contributed to the expansion of the front as a supplemental force to the regular Russian army but, as the invasion became more protracted and the Russian army's operational capability declined, greater reliance was placed on Wagner's capabilities and it was deployed aggressively in particularly difficult theaters of war.

This system of dependence resulted in a highly unusual situation in which Wagner, which was supposed to be a private military company, and the Russian Federation Armed Forces clashed over control in some of the combat zones or, in some instances, Wagner even exercised command and control over units of the Russian Federation Armed Forces. This resulted in the expansion of Wagner's, and thus Prigozhin's, influence, and at the same time caused a feud between Wagner/Prigozhin and the Russian military/Ministry of Defense.

The feud between the two sides came to the surface during the siege of Bakhmut, which had been the scene of some of the fiercest fighting since the early days of the invasion.

In 2023, President Putin became keenly aware of the need to take control of Bakhmut by May 9, the national patriotic anniversary of the victory over Germany, hoping thereby to sustain the domestic

sense of continuity and strengthen support for his regime, and Russian Federation forces and Wagner launched a fierce offensive as the anniversary approached. As the offensive continued, Prigozhin frequently suggested on his and Wagner's social networking sites that they withdraw from the region because of the lack of support and supplies from the Russian Federation Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense, and in May he harshly denounced Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov, commander-in-chief of the campaign against Ukraine. Wagner also began to openly express its dissatisfaction with the Russian Federation Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense, not least by releasing a video announcing its intention to withdraw from Bakhmut the day after the anniversary.<sup>4</sup>

Prigozhin then claimed that the Russian government had reacted to this series of actions by promising to resume supplies to Wagner and to make Wagner's "guardian" Sorokin, who had been removed as commander-in-chief in January 2023, a mediator with the Ministry of Defense.<sup>5</sup> Discontinuing its withdrawal, Wagner remained on the frontline, unilaterally announcing in late May that it had taken control of Bakhmut.<sup>6</sup> Although this seemed to have quieted the discontent, Prigozhin continued to issue daily statements on social networking sites criticizing the Russian military and the Ministry of Defense, especially Shoigu and Gerasimov.

Amid repeated criticism from Prigozhin, the Defense Ministry issued an order in June for all irregular armed groups participating in operations against Ukraine, including Wagner, to contract with the Defense Ministry and come under its control by July 1.<sup>7</sup> Prigozhin immediately rejected the order and condemned Defense Minister Shoigu's policy<sup>8</sup>, but President Putin expressed support for the Defense Ministry's policy<sup>9</sup>, rapidly worsening Prigozhin's and Wagner's position and plunging them into a state of seemingly irreparable conflict with the Russian military and the Defense Ministry.

### 3. The circumstances and motives of the rebellion

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As mentioned in the previous section, Prigozhin's position rapidly deteriorated after the siege of Bakhmut, and he decided to use force, i.e., armed rebellion, as a desperate measure to break the impasse.

On June 23, he said on his social media that the upper echelons of the Defense Ministry had deceived the president and the people into initiating the invasion and, while denying the legitimacy of the invasion, which the Putin administration had said was aimed at the de-Nazification and demilitarization of Ukraine, he declared an armed insurrection in the form of a "march of justice" to topple Defense Minister Shoigu and the upper echelons of the Defense Ministry.<sup>10</sup>

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) immediately declared this an act of treason and launched an investigation<sup>11</sup> even as Prigozhin, along with some of Wagner's troops, began an offensive into Russian territory on the 24th.

The insurgents took bloodless control of Rostov-on-Don and the headquarters of the Southern Military District of the Russian Federation Armed Forces located in that city, disarmed the troops there, and headed north toward Moscow without resistance from either the military or security services. The situation gradually became more serious, with reports emerging that a Russian helicopter and other aircraft had been shot down en route, killing several Russian officers and soldiers.<sup>12</sup>

President Putin declared in a video speech that the armed insurgency was a "betrayal" aimed at overthrowing the regime<sup>13</sup> and sought to suppress the insurgency by ordering the Russian National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAC) to convene and launch an investigation.<sup>14</sup> The insurgents nonetheless continued to move north toward Moscow.

With no solution in sight, fears spread both in Russia and abroad that Wagner would reach Moscow and engage in fighting with local security forces and military units, leading to more chaos. On the following day (June 25), President Lukashenko, a close friend of Prigozhin acting as a mediator between the two sides, began to seek a way out of the situation.

After several rounds of negotiations, the insurgents halted their advance on Moscow and withdrew to Wagner's stronghold. The Putin administration announced that it would drop the investigation into Prigozhin and Wagner and would not hold the insurgents legally responsible, but also proclaimed that Prigozhin himself would be sent to Belarus to continue his activities there.<sup>15</sup>

Why did Prigozhin choose the forceful means of armed insurrection? It would seem his motives can be summarized in two main points.

The first and foremost motivation was to elicit the withdrawal of the order transferring Wagner to the control of the Ministry of Defense.

As indicated in the previous section, contracting with the Ministry of Defense as an irregular armed organization meant that Wagner would lose its independence and come under the control of the Russian Federation Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense with which it had been feuding. When Prigozhin opposed this policy, the Ministry of Defense notified Wagner that, if it refused to sign a contract, it would be cut off from further support and denied participation in operations against Ukraine<sup>16</sup>, but the deadline drew nearer without any sign of compromise. Hence, it is possible that Wagner was hoping that the armed insurgency would compel the Defense Ministry to make concessions on contracting, employing the tactic of eliciting concessions through some form of strong reaction that had proven successful during the offensive against Bakhmut.

Second, Prigozhin sought to maintain and expand his political influence, especially in light of his relationship with Defense Minister Shoigu. Wagner, which had been responsible for part of the front lines from the early stages of the invasion and which had made a significant contribution to the capture of Bakhmut, had gained a lot of attention in Russia; Prigozhin was also popular, especially among far-right politicians and their supporters, for his radical remarks and deeds as well as his criticism of Russian domestic elites. As noted above, it was on the basis of Putin's trust that Prigozhin was able to expand his influence and lead Wagner despite his lack of experience in military affairs.

On the other hand, Defense Minister Shoigu, whom Prigozhin has often criticized, was selected as defense minister in 2012 despite having no military experience because he had earned the firm trust of the Russian people and President Putin through his longtime leadership of the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters (EMERCOM), which is responsible for responding to national emergencies and natural disasters. Prigozhin's goals may have been to use his and Wagner's war record as a backdrop to diminish the political influence of Defense Minister Shoigu, who shares many similarities with Prigozhin in having come to his current position via a mutiny and in enjoying the trust of the Russian people and President Putin, or to oust Shoigu from his current position while simultaneously maintaining or increasing his own political influence domestically through his own presence.

#### 4. The impact of the "Prigozhin Rebellion"

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As noted in the previous section, the worst-case scenario of the "Prigozhin Rebellion" for Russia – fighting in the streets of Moscow and the usurpation of political functions by the rebel forces – was avoided.

Wagner's personnel and equipment will likely be transferred to the control of the Ministry of Defense and the Russian Federal Armed Forces, or to Belarus, bringing Wagner's status as an independent organization in Russia to an end.

Prigozhin was initially thought to have been effectively exiled to Belarus, but there is some uncertainty about his departure, with Russia's Presidential Executive Office having acknowledged that he met with President Putin a few days after the uprising<sup>17</sup> and President Lukashenko having mentioned that Prigozhin was still in hiding in Russia<sup>18</sup>.

In the meantime, Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov remain in their posts, and there are scattered reports that Surovikin has been taken into custody for his involvement in the insurgency<sup>19</sup>. In short, Prigozhin failed in his insurgency and lost everything, including Wagner as an independent organization over which he had strong influence, Putin's trust, and Surovikin's backing within the Defense Ministry.

However, he does seem through this rebellion to have successfully enhanced his presence in Russia to a certain extent, as indicated by reporting that many citizens had reacted positively toward Prigozhin and Wagner as they witnessed the withdrawal from Rostov-on-Don<sup>20</sup>. Enjoying political influence based on the support of some radical groups or even a certain number of citizens beyond these groups, Prigozhin could continue to pose a potential threat to the Putin regime in the future.

On the other hand, the consequences of this rebellion now and in the future for President Putin, the Russian Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense are likely to be serious.

Wagner will continue to be an indispensable force in the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, and President Putin was therefore unable to either suppress the "traitors" who had marched toward the capital and

had attacked and killed/wounded Russian Federation troops, or punish them according to the law. Furthermore, the fact that Putin himself did not stay in Moscow to direct the maintenance of order or directly inspire the people, and that he finally managed to end the rebellion with the help of Lukashenko, a third party from another country, shook to the core the image of a strong president that he had built up since taking office. This stands in contrast to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who remained in Kiev at the outbreak of the invasion and inspired his people through social networking sites.

The failure to take severe action against Wagner will likely have an impact on the strong support of the Russian Armed Forces, one of President Putin's power bases. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Armed Forces faced budgetary and organizational difficulties throughout the 1990s. The Putin administration gradually addressed these problems by increasing the military budget and reforming the military, while at the same time implementing a policy encouraging patriotism among the public that helped restore the military's status. As a result, President Putin gained robust support from the Russian military that he then used to build a firm political base. Putin's failure to punish Wagner severely for leading an armed insurgency and killing troops could lead to a decline in the loyalty of the Russian Armed Forces to the president, which could undermine Putin's political base as he prepares for the presidential election in 2024.

The fact that the insurgents were able to advance so close to Moscow with so little resistance highlights concerns that there are forces in the military, the Defense Ministry and/or the security services that are sympathetic to the "treasonous" Wagner, and that state control over these organizations may be partially dysfunctional. In particular, a power struggle is said to have been underway within the Ministry of Defense between mainstream forces led by Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov and non-mainstream forces led by Surovikin and others since the invasion of Ukraine began, and it is possible that Surovikin and other non-mainstream factions were supporting the rebel forces during this rebellion.

In addition, the treatment of the insurgents, including President Putin's personal meeting with Prigozhin and Wagner officials after the uprising, may give these organizations the perception that they will not be punished severely for launching an armed insurgency to disrupt the status quo, increasing the risk that intra-organizational power struggles will escalate into the use of force in future.

The one-day "Prigozhin Rebellion" has had serious and wide-ranging repercussions for, among other things, President Putin's power base ahead of the 2024 presidential election and his relationship with the Russian Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense, one of the sources of his power. With its aftereffects still being felt, this crisis could cause further turmoil in the Russian Federation under the Putin administration over both the short and long term.

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- <sup>1</sup> Although Prigozhin initially denied any involvement with Wagner, he announced in 2022 that he was its founder. <https://www.afpbb.com/articles/-/3425723>
- <sup>2</sup> Hirose, Yoko, "Russia's Policy toward Africa," *International Affairs*, No. 707 (2022), pp. 39-48.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/world/africa/wagner-group-africa.html>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://jp.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-prigozhin-bakhmut-idJPL6N37204M>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65516633>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-prigozhin-claims-full-control-bakhmut-2023-05-20/>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://ria.ru/20230610/dobrovoltsy-1877381036.html>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://jp.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-wagner-idJPKBN2XY04X>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-russia-putin-wagner-idJPKBN2Y0028>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://jp.reuters.com/article/idJPKBN2Y91CN>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/press/message/single.htm%21id%3D10439752%40fsbMessage.html>
- <sup>12</sup> The press initially released conflicting reports about the damage to the Russian Federation Armed Forces, but President Vladimir Putin in a speech on March 26 mentioned that several aircraft pilots had been killed in the line of duty. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71528>
- <sup>13</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71496>
- <sup>14</sup> <http://nac.gov.ru/hronika-sobytyi/fsb/soobshchenie-fsb-rossii-o-zayavleniyah-i-deystviyah-e.html>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://jp.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-russia-prigozhin-withdraw-idJPKBN2YA015>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://tass.ru/politika/18148851>
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/910904>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://jp.reuters.com/article/belarus-lukashenko-idJPL6N38S073>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/06/28/russian-general-arrested-following-wagner-mutiny-mt-russian-a81685>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/stream/article/21651/>