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The Coup that Flew the Coop

By Diane Chido
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“Anyone who thinks they know what the hell is going on in Russia right now is smoking something!” said colorful then-U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger in August 1991. He was speaking on CNN while then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin was standing on a tank in front of Moscow’s White House.[1] This quote is entirely applicable to the current situation in Russia.

The crisis began June 23 when a trusted ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to have turned on him. Yevgeny Prigozhin is one of the famous Russian oligarchs, rising from a street vendor to a restaurateur, then running the Wagner Group, an enormous paramilitary organization. A Prigozhin subsidiary provided the “little green men” who were reported massing in Crimea just before the Russian invasion in 2014 and another was responsible for meddling in the 2016 election, allegedly under Putin’s orders. This company has been able to carry out secret operations for Putin while offering him some cover of deniability, since they are not strictly part of the Russian military or government.

Wagner mercenaries have become a critical augmentation component of the poorly trained and equipped Russian military faring so badly in the war in Ukraine. Despite Prigozhin’s claims of insufficient war management and supplies, Wagner has been highly effective and infamously brutal in its efforts to counter Ukraine’s defense and is already under investigation for numerous war crimes.

On June 23, Prigozhin announced that his forces had captured two key military installations that served as staging bases for Russia’s war efforts. He then claimed

that they would be marching on Moscow to demand a change in the Ministry of Defense's leadership, which he has vociferously blamed for Russia's poor performance in the conflict, specifically aiming his ire at Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Army Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov, neither of whom has been directly seen nor heard from throughout the crisis.

Prigozhin marched his troops within 120 miles of Moscow, which was rapidly preparing for an onslaught, and then suddenly stopped, claiming he did not want to shed Russian blood. After tense hours of negotiation, it was announced that Prigozhin and his accompanying forces would go into exile in neighboring Belarus, free from prosecution. There, a final agreement would be brokered by longtime autocratic Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, a close ally of Putin and a good friend of Prigozhin. Many of these troops were already recruited from prison to fight in exchange for amnesty.



Putin and Lukashenko fitted out for hockey

Many analysts scoff at this outcome as Lukashenko is more a Putin client than an ally, with Belarus' survival almost entirely dependent upon Putin's support and largesse. Belarus has also served as a staging area for Russian assaults on Ukraine. Like Putin, Lukashenko is a strongman who enjoys playing professional hockey.[2]

While the world is still waiting to learn the fallout, Ukraine has taken full advantage of the absence of these forces, rumored to number up to 25,000, to press their planned counteroffensive. Unconfirmed reports indicate they have retaken Bakhmut, a town often in the news for brutalities inflicted upon it by Wagner forces. A popular meme shows Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky eating popcorn while watching footage of the unfolding crisis.

Throughout these events, I wore out my fingers texting many friends with expert knowledge of Russia. One close friend who moved to the U.S. from Moscow in 1996 presciently noted "Oligarch vs FSB, I bet on FSB every time." The FSB is

the Russian Federal Security Service, Putin's intelligence agency and an heir of the KGB.

Years ago, Putin is rumored to have called together all the oligarchs who were wreaking havoc on Russian institutions and its economy. Supposedly he told them that he would ensure they would lose everything if they did not stop the violent squabbling that was tearing the country apart. Most consented and remained wealthy and powerful, only as long as they followed Putin's orders. Some, like Boris Berezovsky, fled to London, where he continued opposing Putin until his questionable death. These activities have been connected to several mysterious poisonings of Russians in the U.K.

Once again, it seems that the FSB has stopped another oligarch who had thought himself untouchable. Or has it? State television propagandists have struggled to find a silver lining in Putin's handling of events but State Duma member and former Army commander Andrey Gurulyov publicly cried foul insisting the only proper response for treason is not exile but death and openly criticized Putin for letting the coup leader go.[3]

The sight of Rostov-on-Don welcoming Wagner Group members suggested that they were glad that someone was opposing Putin. But if you listen carefully to Prigozhin's prolific and loud rhetoric, he refrains from criticizing Putin, demanding the firing of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov. Perhaps the Russian people have felt the same way. There must be a sense of national shame that this war is taking so long against a force they were led to believe by Putin they could beat handily. Videos also show evidence that Wagner mercenaries were greeted as heroes in towns as they marched toward Moscow.

However, other reports indicate Prigozhin's beef with Shoigu is personal, claiming he has attempted to draft Wagner troops into the regular army, which would cost Prigozhin incalculable prestige and fortune. This is bolstered by reports that the remaining Wagner forces will become part of the Russian military once those in mutiny are exiled to Belarus.[4]

Wagner provides mercenaries and security to leaders and assets, such as mines and businesses around the globe, particularly Africa, especially in autocratic countries or those in conflict. Some have speculated that Prigozhin is not even in Belarus but has taken off from Crimea, headed to safety in Africa. However, he reported he was in a Minsk hotel.

Some Russians interviewed by CNN on Moscow streets felt the war had been poorly managed and expressed support for Prigozhin's protest. Many of them have also asserted that other things have been poorly managed in the country, perhaps indicating that Russians may not support Putin and the war. Over a million Russians have also left the country in protest and to avoid conscription.

Western analysts delightedly agree that this has weakened Putin, repeating the phrase “cracks have appeared.” Putin has feared popular uprisings since election demonstrations began in 2011. In the coming days, we will see if there are shake-ups in the war’s administration as Prigozhin has demanded for weeks.

Early on June 26, Russian state television broadcast two videos, one of Putin and one of Shoigu, neither of which are confirmed to be current. The one of Putin is alleged to be from a conference he attended earlier this year and the one of Shoigu just shows him on a plane allegedly visiting troops. These “signs of life” are mainly considered “signs of trouble” as they do not address the unfolding crisis and provide no clues about their whereabouts. Eventually, a new video was released in which Putin castigated the organizers of the action, but confirmed the regular soldiers were Russian patriots free to join the regular army, go into exile, or return to their families.

Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peshkov insists that Putin is in the Kremlin, but reports allege that both of his presidential jets took off sometime on Sunday, suggesting inexplicably that they were heading in the direction of St. Petersburg.[5] It is well known that Putin’s palace on the Black Sea has an extensive underground bunker,[6] but that it is in the opposite direction from St. Petersburg.

Many Western observers seem to want to believe that Putin is in trouble, but sometimes you are better off with the devil you know. The death of strongman Josef Broz Tito began the unraveling of Yugoslavia that ended only after a genocide. The ousting of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, whose authoritarian regime kept three unfriendly groups together, led to a long and bloody civil war.

My Russian friends also noted that the word on the Moscow street is that Putin himself manufactured this coup to provide a pretext for a purge. This is widely alleged to have been what happened in the so-called Turkish coup attempt in 2016, which enabled President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to establish martial law and arrest 6,000 people, including senior military and government officials.[7] I found it interesting in this light that Erdoğan was the first foreign leader to pledge his full support for Putin during this coup attempt, although he has remained publicly neutral throughout the hostilities in Ukraine.

Russia is famous for its *dezinformatsiya* and *maskirovka*. These include the kind of false flag operations we have seen throughout this latest conflict, such as Russia claiming Ukraine blew up its own dam. After this, there was outrage that animals in a nearby zoo had drowned. Putin claimed there was no zoo. Then, when it became too obvious this was untrue, he claimed there *was* a zoo, but all the animals had been safely evacuated.[8] So spake the naked emperor ...

Although I have studied Russia all my life and am trained as an intelligence analyst, I do not have a magic crystal ball. These events are still unfolding. While it is important that we stay tuned, as President Biden has strongly reiterated, thus far there is no role for the West in this internal debacle. If we officially call for Putin's ouster, we play into his narrative that the West is behind all of Russia's troubles.

My son, Zack, texted me on Sunday, "Down with Wagner Group!" I responded, "And down with Putin. Who is there to root for?" He wisely replied, "The people."

References

1. I have never been able to find a citation for this quote, but I heard him say it, and never forgot it. It is entirely in keeping with Mr. Eagleburger's communication style and I am afraid you will have to take my word that he said this at the time.
2. Graphic 1: "Putin and Lukashenko play ice hockey amid heightened tensions in Ukraine," NBC News, December 30, 2021 available [here](#) accessed on June 26, 2023
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4. "Belarus leader Lukashenko's purported mediation in Kremlin crisis stretches credibility to the limit," CNN, June 26, 2023 available [here](#) accessed on June 26, 2023
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