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Consequences of the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin

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The failed coup by the Wagnerites showed the weakness of the Russian state and personally humiliated Vladimir Putin. From his point of view, eliminating Yevgeny Prigozhin was necessary. In this way, he wanted to show who was in control of the situation and warn potential rebels. In the short term, this may produce results, but in the long term, the political losses may be serious.

Elimination of Yevgeny Prigozhin. On 23 August 2023, i.e., two months after the failed rebellion, the leader of the Wagner Group and his closest associates died in a plane crash. There has been much speculation and many theories related to this event, especially since rumours about his death had already circulated before. However, there was no surprise – after the June march of the Wagnerites on Moscow and the words of Vladimir Putin publicly accusing Prigozhin of treason, the president, personally humiliated, was widely expected to take revenge, both in Russia and abroad.

Prigozhin had also had many influential enemies for a long time among the Russian elites, who considered him an upstart. However, he also benefited at the same time from the protection provided by Putin, whom he met in the 1990s in St. Petersburg and who turned a petty criminal into an oligarch.

The participation of the Wagner Group in the fighting on the Ukrainian front made its leader popular with society and the army, but his death did not cause much of a stir in Russia. Even his supporters largely found the assault on power and fratricidal bloodshed unacceptable.

Within two months of the Wagnerite rebellion, the Russian authorities carried out a number of actions aimed at the actual dismantling of the Wagner Group. Not only was the transfer of its main forces to Belarus announced but part of Prigozhin's property was seized, preparations were made for an exchange of leadership in Wagnerian formations in Africa and Syria, and the official media discredited both the oligarch and his people.

After the plane crash, it was quite widely accepted in Russia that it was in fact an act of revenge by the Kremlin and President Putin personally. Many circles (e.g., the army command, which was deeply conflicted with Prigozhin and brutally criticized by him) believed that the head of the Wagnerites had been exemplarily and justly punished. Significantly, there were virtually no suggestions that his death could have been the result of Ukrainian actions.

Consequences for Russia. The elimination of the head of the Wagner Group is primarily important for the internal situation in Russia. The Wagner coup showed the weakness of the Russian state and was an unprecedented blow to Vladimir Putin's image. The fact that the traitors, as the President directly called them, did not suffer any serious consequences, and Prigozhin even met with Putin, caused surprise and shock in Russia, where you can receive a long sentence for even alleged opposition to the authorities. Many conspiracy theories have emerged in this context, not only in Russia but also with the prevailing belief that Putin's power and position are weakening. The lack of success in the war, discord and rivalry among the elites, a dissatisfied society and the belief in the weakness of the government could create a dangerous situation for Putin, especially if Prigozhin was not punished for his rebellion.

Especially since he behaved in a way that suggested that he did not fully understand the situation he found himself in – he continued to conduct political and business activities, moving between Russia and Africa and

disregarding his “exile” to Belarus. The upcoming regional and local elections in Russia (September 2023) and presidential elections (March 2024) were also important – despite their superficial nature, they are an important indicator of the legitimacy of the government.

As a result, regardless of whether Prigozhin was killed or (as proponents of the hoax theory would have it) fled from Russia, he was effectively eliminated and this was widely perceived as a warning to subsequent, potential rebels, and a signal that the “tsar” was in control of the situation. The crackdown on the Wagner Group was also a brutal show of force, in which the authorities even went so far as to raze the cemeteries of the Wagnerites who died in the war in Ukraine.

These actions brought results: Prigozhin’s supporters were effectively intimidated, and at the same time, the Kremlin also pacified the so-called “ultrapatriots”, until recently loudly criticizing the army and the authorities for, in their opinion, inappropriate (ineffective) conduct of the war. The arrest of Igor Girkin, the most famous and influential representative of these circles, was a clear signal that further criticism would not be tolerated.

The Wagner Group itself de facto ceased to exist in its previous form. Some of the mercenaries may end up in other paramilitary units, while others will be recruited by the army. These plans, however, may be difficult to implement because the Wagnerites, as with any formation of this type, were loyal to their leader and mentor, not to the state and its institutions.

From the point of view of Russia’s interests, however, the African component of the Wagner Group remains more important. Thanks to this unit, Russia reaped material benefits (profits from mine trade and smuggling) as well as political and propaganda benefits -- Moscow will probably appoint a new commander such as GRU General Andrey Averyanov, who is under consideration. However, Prigozhin’s charisma and contacts as well as the loyalty of his subordinates will be difficult to replace.

Consequences for neighbouring countries. A direct consequence of Prigozhin’s unsuccessful rebellion was the appearance of the Wagnerites on the territory of Belarus. Russia wanted to use them as an instrument of pressure on NATO, primarily on the countries bordering Belarus – but also on Belarus itself and Alyaksandr Lukashenko. The Wagnerites in Belarus served as a tool of hybrid war – their very presence near the borders of NATO countries was supposed to cause socio-political discord and a decrease in trust in state institutions, as well as create a sense of threat. In fact, in Poland, Lithuania and Latvia people began to fear the intensification of provocations and other hybrid activities.

In Poland, especially in the border areas, but also in the media, there were numerous fears and false rumours about Wagnerites allegedly infiltrating Polish territory to carry out terrorist attacks and acts of sabotage. The reputation of mercenaries known for ruthlessness, border incidents and military manoeuvres conducted in Belarus near the Polish border also raised concerns.

Moreover, Lukashenko suggested that Prigozhin’s men were ready to march on Poland. The withdrawal of most of the Wagner Group from Belarus and its actual decomposition changed the situation dramatically. Russia has lost an important tool for hybrid operations, and the sense of threat in Poland, as in Lithuania and Latvia, has significantly decreased. This does not mean, however, that there is no risk of provocation and sabotage at the border.

In Ukraine, Prigozhin’s death was received with satisfaction, as the Wagnerites had committed many war crimes. Attention was also drawn to the fact that it was a “gift” for Ukraine’s Independence Day – the death of the group’s leader coincided with Ukraine’s Independence Day.

It was also emphasized, in the context of possible attempts to persuade Ukraine to negotiate with Russia, that Prigozhin’s fate proves that Vladimir Putin cannot be trusted. However, from Ukraine’s point of view, the Wagner

Group is no longer of major importance: since June 2023 it has not taken part in the fighting and has no influence on the course of the war, and its presence in Belarus was not treated as a serious threat to Ukraine.

However, from Lukashenko's point of view, Prigozhin's death was probably beneficial. During the June coup, Lukashenko, contrary to his boastful rhetoric, did not play any key role in resolving the conflict – he was only a tool useful in the given circumstances. The appearance of the Wagnerites on the territory of Belarus, contrary to his public declarations, was not desired by him. The Wagner Group was useful for Lukashenko as an element of a hybrid war against the West, but above all, it was another instrument used to make Belarus more dependent on Russia.

Conclusions

The crash of Prigozhin's plane is important primarily from the point of view of the internal situation in Russia. It should be noted that the "doublethink" characteristic of Russia is visible: on the one hand, Prigozhin's death was not a surprise, there is a common belief that he died on President Putin's orders; on the other hand, no one says it directly, such accusations do not appear in the public space, and an official investigation is underway. This façade of legalism is a permanent element of Russia's political practice, both internally and externally.

Foreign comments, mainly Western ones, referred to Russia as a "mafia organization" or a "criminal syndicate". It was recalled that since February 2022 alone, several dozen people in Russia (military, businessmen, high-level officials, etc.) have died in unexplained circumstances. Specific symbolism was also emphasized: Anna Politkovskaya was murdered on Putin's birthday, Boris Nemtsov just outside the Kremlin walls, and Yevgeny Prigozhin two months after his failed coup.

However, Prigozhin's elimination did not have to be only an act of revenge but was also, or primarily, a political calculation. Putin reminded everyone who rules Russia, but it may be costly in the long run. The Wagner Group has ceased to exist in its current form, and its reconstruction will be time-consuming and perhaps impossible. Thus, Russia loses an important instrument to achieve its goals, which may be costly, for example in Africa. More importantly, it should also be assumed that in Russia itself, internal fighting will intensify and become more brutal among the political elites, secret services, army, influential state institutions, and oligarchs.

The death of Prigozhin, previously an untouchable member of the "old guard" from St. Petersburg, will have an intimidating effect, but in the long run it may be a catalyst for the fight for Putin's legacy – especially if there are still no successes in the war with Ukraine and if there are clear symptoms of the erosion of the Russian political, economic, and social system.

In the international dimension, however, unlike the domestic dimension, Vladimir Putin did not achieve even short-term benefits. In the eyes of critics, being the perpetrator of armed aggression and being prosecuted for war crimes, he additionally lost credibility. He gained little in the eyes of his allies.