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‘Wagner as an organisation is finished’

The head of the FES Russia programme, Alexey Yusupov, on the death of Prigozhin, violence of the Russian regime and stability of the Putin system

Wagner boss Yevgeny Prigozhin died in a plane crash. What impact does the presumed downing have on Russia?

We will probably have to wait a while longer to find out exactly what happened. But it doesn't really matter whether it was a missile or a bomb. Because the absolute majority of Russian society believes the crash was a retaliatory strike by the Kremlin. I see two main consequences: The first is an intensification of repression, which has already picked up a lot after the Wagner revolt in June. Of course, one can say that Russia was already massively characterised by repression, but there is still room for the elimination of silent – and not-so-silent – political opponents. There is a wave of repressive measures. A new sentence against Alexey Navalny has been handed down completely without need, with an additional 19 years in prison. We have the arrest of Igor Girkin, an ultra-nationalist blogger who was responsible for Russia's first breakthrough into eastern Ukraine in 2014. The arrest of the left-wing former dissident Boris Kagarlitsky. And a few days ago, the country's most prominent election observer, Grigory Melkonyanz, was arrested, despite actually not presenting any significant or audible opposition for a long time. I think this will continue. In the short term, the repressive apparatus will bite away at any perceived opposition or dissidence – even within its own ranks. That is also the truly new thing – the repression is now turned against an insider of the system who has probably dared to speak to the people himself, to send political messages, i.e. to claim a prerogative from Vladimir Putin. So for the time being, it will become even more repressive, even more aggressive.

Things are being tidied up, and with an intensity that also includes the removal of political opponents from the skies over central Russia. This is a turn towards such a brutal and almost theatrical use of force, which of course comes as a shock to the whole of society. If these are the means to which the Kremlin is resorting, then it is a new chapter

in Putin's political thinking. This must give pause for thought to all those who think that this is still a rational head of state who may have made mistakes in some decisions but is actually quite reasonable in principle.

The second effect is that, through the increase of repression, the regime will lose one of its legs of legitimacy in the medium term, namely that of an actually quite reasonable, well-meaning, perhaps geopolitically somewhat unfortunate but fundamentally normal country. Because up to now, that has still been the internal image, and I see that beginning to falter.

Individual Wagner members announced a retaliation. Is another uprising to be feared?

We will have to wait and see. With Prigozhin and his deputy Dmitri Utkin, the two most important men, gone, it is now up to the commanders who come after them. For example, Anton Yelizarov, combat name 'Lotus', or Andrey Trochev, combat name 'Sedoj', of which one will now be the next. I haven't heard anything from them so far. For me, it is clear: Wagner as a unit, as an organisation, is finished. It will no longer take on any geopolitical functions, not even in Africa. It will either be rebranded, perhaps some of the men will be transferred to other assignments, their missions will likely be handed over to other quasi-private companies, e.g. 'Redut'. It is now also increasingly clear that this transitional period, these two months between the revolt and the crash of the plane, was a time in which the Russian state leadership analysed things again and put them in order. On the one hand, the revolt was examined and re-examined: who was involved? For example, General Sergei Surovikin was removed from his post as commander-in-chief of the air and space forces yesterday. On the other hand, preparations have been made to neutralise Wagner, to distribute them spatially and to see where certain benefits can still be derived from the group.

Wagner is – as of now – in my opinion not capable of acting as a complete organisation. I would not expect a putsch or revolt. That does not mean that there could not be isolated actions by convinced supporters. But none of this has the dimension of the events of two months ago. We also see solidarity movements. For example, flowers were laid all night in front of the Wagner company headquarters in St Petersburg, which had already been evacuated two months ago. For many, Prigozhin has been something of a patriotic Robin Hood, fighting against the corruption of the elites. These flowers were cleared away in the morning, but new flowers will be brought. There is an emotional moment there. We know that in Rostov-on-Don – the city where the revolt started two months ago with the march on

Moscow – the police were put on alert, so to speak, in anticipation of possible rallies, solidarity actions, or even anger. But there was only one demonstrator who came to the main square of the city with the symbolism of the Wagner troops. Everything is extremely limited. So I don't expect any violent manifestation of discontent.

Prigozhin's death, the new condemnation of Navalny, drone attacks on Moscow. How fragile is the Russian power structure?

In addition to those mentioned, there are other factors determining the overall strain on the regime right now, for example the economic situation. The rouble is very weak, most recently, the exchange rate with the dollar was over 100 roubles. That has been an important psychological limit. This means that some of the successes that the central bank achieved immediately after the invasion are now being undone. You can also see this in the current economic situation. It can be presented as positive because of the ramping up of the arms-related parts of the economy, but it is becoming increasingly clear to everyone that in one or two years, there will indeed be a major upheaval in the economy. This can be seen in many factors: in the horizon of expectations of consumers, in decisions of companies and in credit behaviour. It is certainly a time of great uncertainty. Citizens no longer plan anything. A regime can't really rule for very long in this way, especially since elections are coming up soon: first regional elections in autumn and then presidential elections next year. In such a situation, the regime becomes rigid and repressive. Because now really no more mistakes can be made.

And in the past, too many mistakes were made and allowed. Does that mean that the regime is very fragile? I wouldn't put it that way. The regime is very willing to use force. Of course, that has costs and risks – and it can also go wrong. We are in a situation in which the tension in the Putin system is so high that it is now possible to react to the slightest danger with a high use of force and violence, externally, internally, economically, with regard to social protests and against political dissidents who have just been cleared out as a precaution. There is a risk in that. I don't see any inherent fragility of the regime, but a situation in which the nervousness is so high that mistakes can easily happen. Especially since now even actually ‘loyal’ actors like Prigozhin can make fatal mistakes, as happened to him with his revolt. And the susceptibility to mistakes is exactly what we have to look at.

How secure is Putin sitting on his throne?

The wildest theories are circulating regarding the initiator of the attack. I don't really like to enter the realm of conspiracy theories. But

the mere possibility that it was not Putin at all, but someone else from the political system or from the power elites, naturally makes the president look weak. To put it in a nutshell: If Putin did it, he looks weak and vengeful. And if he didn't do it, but someone else did, he looks even weaker. In this sense, aggressiveness is not synonymous with strength. Of course, in the short term, it means stabilisation. But in the longer term, it is a loss of prestige, future viability and also trustworthiness, because people in the elite will say to themselves more and more: Putin is now 70, how exactly will he govern this country in the future? Suddenly, this question is being asked more and more openly.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



Alexey Yusupov

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