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The biggest game changer in Russian politics

We don’t know what Prigozhin really intended with his mutiny. But he accidentally revived a preoccupation long thought dead in Moscow — real politics

The more time that passes after the spectacular mutiny of the Wagner troops, the more the conversation about it is dominated by speculation, myths and conspiracy theories. There are more questions than answers. Did Yevgeny Prigozhin count on any significant collaboration on the part of the regular Russian armed forces? Is Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko merely a respectable ‘spokesperson’ called in to preserve *protocol decorum*, or did he really take on the role of arbiter in a conflict in which Russian President Vladimir Putin was no longer the highest authority but was just an active part to the conflict? What exactly was the decisive point that made the Wagner advance, which was already 200 kilometres in front of seemingly unprotected Moscow, turn back?

Even without having the answers at this stage, one thing is for certain: Prigozhin's revolt is the biggest game changer in the Russian-Ukrainian war so far. Even more than that – Putin's system of power is facing exceptionally profound challenges.

Some facts about Wagner

What is the ‘Private Military Company Wagner’? It is important to understand that 'mercenaries' in this context does not mean ‘Freischärler’ but 'paramilitaries', i.e. formations that can carry out black ops and other operations globally and with credible deniability on the part of the Russian government. Wagner is a creation of the Russian military intelligence, making Prigozhin more of a CEO appointed by the client, rather than the group's commander. It is a useful foreign and security policy tool for the Russian Federation and will remain so, regardless of whether the name ‘Wagner’ persists and how many of the fighters still want to and are allowed to continue.

A few facts about Prigozhin should be kept in mind. He is an old

companion of Putin's, still from their time together in Saint Petersburg, but not a close confidant. But instead, he has proven to be a reliable and inventive 'plenipotentiary' of the regime for special projects – in the entrepreneurial field, as a moderniser of stale state propaganda ('troll factories') and, most recently, as the face of an unbureaucratic military start-up that can be counted among the more effective parts of the Russian military. He is a classic oligarch of the Putin era. His main asset is not ownership of resources and corporations but participation in the flow of money from state contracts, which in turn only go to loyal and reliable parties. His revolt becomes most understandable when analysed as an attempt to prevent falling out of Putin's favour by any means – this scenario was already becoming apparent with the plans to integrate the Wagner fighters into the Russian army. Prigozhin did what he had always succeeded in doing in the past – he bluffed and played poker. But he remained a part of the system through and through, and it is very questionable whether he would really have gone all the way to the Red Square. Much suggests that he was a lot more interested in preventing a real confrontation than Putin himself.

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Prigozhin's political intuition is remarkable; he owes his great popularity – among the population as well as the security authorities – precisely to the fact that he has skilfully made use of anti-government and anti-war sentiments. His last social media appearances before the 'March of Justice', in which he branded the reasons for the war as lies and deceit and used rhetoric that could have come from Russia's imprisoned main opposition politician Alexey Navalny, are astonishing. Prigozhin senses that there is exactly one issue that moves the majority of Russians – corruption as the most fundamental root of all evil in their country. Yes, his tone is nationalistic and populist. But ultimately, he draws his reputation from the genuine frustration of the Russian people with their state. Now, in the eyes of his former supporters, he is a double traitor, not a tribune of the people, but merely a cog in the machine, a member of the elite who simply wanted – and perhaps got – a better deal.

The Kremlin’s fading authority

All the more remarkable is the conflict between Wagner and the official structures of the Russian state that we have now witnessed. For the first time since the Second Chechen War, the Kremlin's sovereignty over internal security is threatened. Even this brief episode now raises doubts about the extent to which the cornerstone of the ‘Putin social contract’ is still intact – namely, the stability of public space, which is treated as sacred. The monopoly on the use of force in southern Russia has briefly faltered, and things have not looked good for some time. Various groups such as the Ukrainian-backed Russian volunteer corps, the Wagner troops and the regular armed forces are standing in each other's way – and this in the context of a Ukrainian counter-offensive that continues to unfold. This is not how one imagines things to be when professional intelligence officers rule the country.

The return of public and large-scale violence as a mode of conflict among the powerful is also significant in another way: until now, conflicts of interest among the elite were settled in secret, moderated by Putin and usually without public attention. Now, Putin has become increasingly remote, inaccessible in his self-imposed historical mission, while formal institutions are no longer qualified to act in such conflict scenarios. When there is a dispute on the political Mount Olympus, the country merely watches. Without instructions from the Kremlin, governors, police functionaries or military officers don't even know what kind of behaviour is expected of them.

For too long, politics in Russia has been above all about staging and performance, which is one reason why there was no resistance to the would-be putschists. Because even members of the Russian army and police were no longer able to understand whether it was theatre or the real thing. Such a low level of identification with the political content could be called opportunism or fatalism. Either way, it does not bode well for war support. This war was and remains unpopular among the population, because it is also, above all, a project of the political elites.

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Prigozhin leaves, the spirit remains. The Russian state, which has been increasingly brutal against the liberal opposition for many years now, has to realise that its most active dissidence is somewhere else – namely on the right-wing fringe of society. The upcoming presidential election in 2024 should actually be conducted without crises. The election is an important moment for the regular renewal of Putin's

drastically brought forward by recent events.

unchallenged leadership, and it is not at all about a fair and free political competition but about the genuinely plebiscitary. Putin relies on popular support to discipline his power vertical. Such an election cannot be too doctored and manipulated, because then, the executive apparatus would ask the question – why exactly does it need this president if the election is 100 per cent fake anyway?

The question of whether Putin is the best guarantor of political stability, internal security and a functioning conflict resolution mechanism between the elites has been drastically brought forward by recent events. We can already see how the system reacts. Semi-daily, there are new public appearances by the president, speeches, addresses, appointments. The warring 'father of the nation' has descended and is campaigning again – selfies, red ribbons, civic talks.

Ukraine benefits from this crisis in two ways. After a moment of shock, authoritarian systems usually respond with new harshness. The Kremlin seems to have plans to upgrade the, so far, police-repressive National Guard, led by General Solotov, a former bodyguard of Putin, to a full-fledged internal force modelled on the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, NKVD, by arming it with heavy equipment. Given the current supply situation, this equipment can only be taken from the stocks of the army fighting in Ukraine.

Much more important is the impact of the domestic crisis on the Russian grand strategy in the war against Ukraine and the conflict against the West. This was ultimately based on the principle of 'time works for us'. A prolonged confrontation has been chosen to undermine Ukrainian, European and American stamina and solidarity; Moscow has assumed that it is in the driver's seat and that, sooner or later, it will be victorious simply by maintaining the current level of confrontation. The basic assumptions of this strategy have now been shaken. Can Russia really afford to take that much time? Can the settlement of Putin's succession, even if he quickly re-stabilises himself through a repressive and propagandistic show of force, be managed in parallel with an ongoing war?

We do not know what Prigozhin really intended with his 'march'. But one thing he has done - he accidentally revived a preoccupation long thought dead in Moscow. Politics is back. Real politics, not theatre.



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