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THE CALM AFTER THE STORM

RUSSIA FOLLOWING PRIGOZHIN'S MUTINY

OSW's Russian Department



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MAIN POINTS

- Although Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny was the most serious manifestation of internal instability in Russia in several decades, ultimately it failed to undermine Vladimir Putin's position in the system. The death of the Wagner Group's leader in a plane crash on 23 August 2023, which bore the hallmarks of a public execution, has restored the stability of the regime, which had been temporarily lost.
- The revolt provoked a very restrained response from the Kremlin, and the president was forced to offer security guarantees to the rebels, which also covered Prigozhin's business undertakings. The authorities needed time to investigate the genuine scope of the 'conspiracy', which they suspect was hatched by members of the ruling elite, the military and the law enforcement bodies. Moreover, the government feared a more profound internal destabilisation should the suspects be identified and held accountable in an excessively hasty manner. Although information on acts of repression targeting representatives of the law enforcement bodies (especially the Russian Armed Forces) remains confidential, according to the available information any such acts have been isolated and limited. Minor shifts in the balance of power have been recorded: most importantly, the position of the National Guard, headed by General Viktor Zolotov, has been temporarily boosted. There have been no instances of any members of the political elite (at either the federal or the regional level) being held to account. This may indicate that the Kremlin is relatively certain that Prigozhin's supporters did not play an active role in the mutiny and remain harmless, at least for the time being. In the run-up to the presidential election planned for March 2024, creating the impression of the regime's political unity and resilience will continue to be a priority task for the authorities. Therefore, any potential personnel reshuffles and acts of repression will likely be postponed.
- Instead, the government has launched activities to neutralise selected representatives of those nationalist-imperialist groups which have been critical of the Kremlin (the so-called turbo-patriots) and intensified its efforts to build a positive image for Putin. Following the initial campaign to discredit Prigozhin, state propaganda began to ignore him. Very little publicity was given to the plane crash in which he died. While the official narrative hinted that the plane went down as a result of an accident, it also spread several oblique messages suggesting that the Kremlin may have

been behind it; these should be viewed as attempts to deliberately intimidate critics of the regime.

- The Wagner Group, whose most prominent members remained loyal to Prigozhin, has been stripped of its base in Russia (at Molmino) and its heavy military equipment. July 2023 saw their partial redeployment to Belarus, to a field camp organised in the vicinity of the village of Poplavy near Asipovichy. Prigozhin's death a month later, and the measures launched by the authorities and the ministry of defence to disperse the mercenaries, have resulted in the majority of them leaving Belarus. Some of them continue to serve in the Russian army, while others decided to relocate to Africa.
- The fact that the government had effectively not interfered in Prigozhin's business activity or in the redistribution of those assets proves that these companies were of secondary importance from the Kremlin's point of view because they were not politically involved. The authorities made no attempts to close down or expropriate Prigozhin's companies operating in the catering and property development sectors. In contrast, following the mutiny, the Wagner Group leader dissolved or suspended the operation of the businesses he controlled in the media sector. Control of what the Russian leadership saw as the most valuable asset, that is the 'troll farm', was most likely taken over by the Russian secret services.
- The future of the Wagner Group's military component will be directly linked with the scale of the group's undertakings carried out in Africa, which will likely remain its main area of activity. The remaining mercenaries will be deployed to the Ukrainian front. Several hundred of them are still in Belarus, and Minsk will use this fact to put psychological pressure on Poland and Lithuania as part of the hybrid activities targeting these countries.
- It is unclear whether Prigozhin's mutiny and the Kremlin's reaction to it will have any significant consequences for the future of the regime in the next few years. On the one hand, the fact that the mutineer was eliminated has demonstrated to the Russian elite that the Kremlin remains in full control of the domestic situation and that it has managed to intimidate those who are dissatisfied with the regime, at least for some time. On the other hand, however, the forced compromise made with the 'traitors' has shown that in certain circumstances Putin may be susceptible to pressure exerted as part of a power play.

- In the short-term perspective, no major rifts in the Russian elite or attempts to test the Kremlin's power should be expected. However, the situation may change in the event of any evident failures by Russian troops in Ukraine and/or an increase in social discontent, in particular in the context of economic problems, if the West considerably increases both the quantity and quality of its military assistance to Kyiv and the sanctions are effective. In this situation, any potential dispute within the elite may result in a reshuffle within the top echelons of power, which may (although need not necessarily) trigger a more profound systemic change and a revision of Russia's external policy. However, if another revolt breaks out, no attempts to negotiate with Putin should be expected, because following Prigozhin's death any possible security guarantees he gives will be worthless.

I. THE KREMLIN'S REACTION TO THE MUTINY

1. A shock to the system

Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny, despite being short-lived (lasting about 24 hours from 23 to 24 June), had a strong political and psychological effect. The ease with which members of the Wagner Group started to head towards Moscow without encountering any major resistance provoked panic in the Kremlin. Some representatives of the political and business elite, most likely including Vladimir Putin, left the capital in a hurry. Representatives of big business also exhibited nervous reactions; some of them, most likely fearing for their personal safety, decided to leave or evacuate their family members from Russia to wait out this period of uncertainty abroad. Prigozhin's mutiny has revealed that the Russian state security bodies (the FSB, the Interior Ministry, the National Guard) are unable to neutralise armed rebellion effectively. Their inactivity was also due to the absence of concrete orders on how to react, as well as the conviction that the Wagner Group's leader was under the Kremlin's supervision and his activity was directly controlled by the military.

Prigozhin received no signs of support from the federal and regional elites or the law enforcement bodies, all of which maintained their official, albeit passive, loyalty to the Kremlin. The public also remained passive. Despite this the ultimate result of this stress test was negative, as it revealed the Putinist system's fragility, its weak potential for self-defence, and the shallow nature of the support for the president on the part of the public and the elite. This in turn has undermined the legitimacy of his rule. The speeches Putin made during and immediately after the Wagner Group's revolt can be viewed as clumsy attempts to save face in a situation when the leader turned out to be weak and had lost his ability to influence the course of events.

Although an autocratic regime should naturally react to this situation with an immediate launch of spectacular acts of repression against individuals suspected of insufficient loyalty, this did not happen. This was probably out of fear of domestic destabilisation and reinforcing the impression of the system's fragility, as well as to the uncertainty as to the actual reach of the 'conspiracy' within the structures of the ruling elite and the law enforcement bodies. It took the Kremlin two months to decide to take revenge on the mutiny's author, while the measures intended to discipline the elite were carried out on a relatively minor scale (see below).

2. Prigozhin's death

On 23 August, shortly after 6 pm Moscow time, an Embraer Legacy 600 aircraft belonging to Prigozhin's company, which was *en route* from Moscow to Saint Petersburg, crashed in Tver oblast. According to the Federal Air Transport Agency (*Rosaviatsiya*), on board were the founder of the Wagner Group, his deputy and head of security Valery Chekalov, as well as the Wagner Group's commander Dmitry Utkin and several mercenaries. All the passengers and three crew members (10 individuals in total) were killed. The Investigative Committee has opened a criminal investigation into "the violation of the aircraft's rules of operation". The suspicion of a terrorist attack has provisionally been ruled out. Meanwhile, according to independent experts, the most likely cause of the crash was the detonation of an explosive device (in the days immediately following the crash another hypothesis under consideration was that the plane could have been shot down by Russian air defence). So far, no further information on the progress of the investigation has emerged.

During a meeting of the Valdai Club on 5 October, Putin said that shrapnel from hand grenades had been found in the victims' bodies. He also expressed his disappointment at the fact that no tests for the presence of alcohol and drugs in their blood had been performed. At the same time, he announced that the involvement of external factors in the crash had been ruled out. Therefore, it should be assumed that the incident will be covered up and that the investigators will declare the Wagner Group executives present on board responsible for the death of all 10 individuals; they were allegedly intoxicated, and were handling the weapons they were carrying in a careless manner.

The crash bore the hallmarks of an execution carried out as part of a special operation. Regardless of the legal classification of the incident as ultimately communicated by the Kremlin, it was widely perceived as an assassination ordered by Putin. This is in line with the president's intention to send a strong warning signal to the dead warlord's potential followers. This signal was symbolically reinforced by the fact that the mutineer was killed exactly two months after the launch of the failed revolt.

Prigozhin's elimination by the authorities was only a matter of time, considering Putin's need to rebuild his shaky position in the power apparatus alongside with his image as a strong leader ahead of the presidential elections scheduled for March 2024. The Wagner Group's march on Moscow has revealed the weaknesses of the system, including the insufficient degree of organisation

in the army & the law enforcement bodies, and the low morale among their officers and civilian employees. It also was an act of unprecedented humiliation for the country's leader, who was forced to make an unwanted compromise with a person he publicly called a 'traitor'. The two months following the revolt sparked numerous uncomfortable questions for the Kremlin about the regime's fundamental robustness. This was because in that period Prigozhin continued much of his earlier activity and avoided punishment for his mutiny, due to the security guarantees the president had given him. The doubts arose because from the elite's point of view Prigozhin's continued undisturbed public activity could have indicated that the head of state was incompetent, and might have resulted in the disintegration of the system of power.

3. The Kremlin's attitude towards the law enforcement bodies

There have been **no significant personnel reshuffles in the law enforcement ministries** since the end of the mutiny and the death of its organisers. This is due to Putin's determination to cover up the deficiencies of the state apparatus as quickly as possible. Although the authorities have repeatedly formulated accusations against the Wagner Group members, far-reaching caution as regards possible retaliatory measures remains evident. For example, on 6 July Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation and one of its leading decision-makers, announced that "the treacherous actions of the Wagner leadership have effectively brought the country to the brink of civil war" (he made this statement during a meeting on national security in the Southern Federal District, held in Krasnodar).

Rumours regarding a personnel purge among the senior commanders of the Russian Armed Forces have not been confirmed. In most instances, these officers were moved to other functions. On 12 July, State Duma deputy Andrei Gurulov, a former deputy commander of the Southern Military District, revealed a recording of General Ivan Popov, commander of the 58th Army, saying that he had been dismissed after notifying the Chief of the General Staff of the poor situation on the front (he is to be sent to Syria). In mid-September, Army General Sergei Surovikin, deputy commander of Russian troops in Ukraine and commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces, who was dismissed shortly after the mutiny, attended talks in Algeria to agree the terms and conditions of bilateral military cooperation. The fates of Surovikin's deputy, Colonel General Andrei Yudin (who was said to have been removed from his post on 29 June), and Deputy Chief of Military Intelligence Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseev, remain unclear. Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek

Yevkurov, who was in close contact with the mutiny's leader, retained his post. The only person to have lost their job for collaborating with Prigozhin was Deputy Defence Minister Lieutenant General Mikhail Mizintsev. After his dismissal he joined the Wagner Group's command structure, and his further fate remains unknown.

The head of the National Guard (NG) Viktor Zolotov turned out to be the main beneficiary of the revolt. He presented his organisation as the only force capable of defending Moscow against the rebels, and requested Putin to establish units within the NG and to equip them with heavy military hardware, including tanks and artillery units. On 19 July, in a fast-track procedure, the State Duma passed an amendment to the law regulating the operation of this organisation which took into account Zolotov's demands. The marginalisation of the Wagner Group has enabled the government to modify the internal security system to boost the position of the FSB and the Interior Ministry. On 25 July, the law on arms trading was amended; according to its new wording regional governors, once they obtain the president's approval, are allowed to create **special armed units** which can operate during military mobilisation and martial law. According to the law's assumptions, the operation of the new structures (referred to as 'specialised companies') will be supervised by the FSB and/or the Interior Ministry, depending on the specific situation. Their task is to assist the law enforcement ministries in maintaining public order, protecting the state border and fighting foreign sabotage groups.

4. The Kremlin's attitude towards the political elite

The state administration has so far not seen any personnel reshuffles, mainly due to the leadership's reluctance to destabilise the situation ahead of the regional elections (which were held on 8-10 September) and the presidential election (planned for March 2024). No information is available which might suggest whom the authorities may have viewed as insufficiently loyal during the mutiny and who therefore may be targeted by repression in the future. Several individuals within groups linked with the government have raised the need to settle accounts with those disloyal members of the elite who had briefly left Russia on 24 June. State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin has called for the dismissal of public officials and executives of state-controlled companies who in this way demonstrated their doubts regarding the stability of the Russian system of power. It was announced that a list of such individuals would be compiled in cooperation with the law enforcement ministries and the civil aviation office. According to one MP, the publication of this list

could prevent disinformation and end speculation about a ‘mass-scale flight’ which has been spread in the interests of Western secret services. Ideologist and propagandist Aleksandr Dugin and film director and propagandist Nikita Mikhalkov were among several individuals who have emphasised the need to carry out a purge among those responsible for allowing the revolt to happen and for failing to respond to it in an adequate manner. It cannot be ruled out that if a decision to punish disloyal individuals is made, it will be implemented with caution so as not to destabilise the situation within the establishment.

5. The Kremlin’s attitude towards the regional authorities

Neither Prigozhin’s mutiny nor his death has triggered a personnel reshuffle among the regional governors; all of them have retained their posts. Moreover, in the September elections the incumbent governors – including those who were problematic from the Kremlin’s point of view, such as Valentin Konovalov, the governor of the Republic of Khakassia, who comes from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation – obtained excellent results and were re-elected. The presidential election scheduled for March 2024, which has been calculated to consolidate Putin’s position in the system, will be the principal axis of cooperation between Moscow and the governors of Russia’s federal subjects. The governors are expected to ensure that the incumbent president garners a sufficiently big number of votes in the regions and that the voting result is in line with that desired by the Kremlin.

Since the death of Wagner’s leader, Putin has received nine governors in the Kremlin, attended the inauguration of the Moscow mayor, visited Tver oblast, Krasnodar *krai*, Nizhny Novgorod oblast, Primorsky *krai*, Amur oblast, Udmurtia, Saint Petersburg, Novgorod oblast and Perm *krai*, and held a video conference with 26 recently re-elected heads of regions. During his talks with the governors, he paid considerable attention to issues such as regional development and the living standards of the local population, while during his travels across Russia he visited centres of Orthodox worship, a shipbuilding complex, the Vostochny cosmodrome and other facilities. He also met researchers and secondary school students, and opened a section of the M12 motorway. Visits paid by the head of state to the regions are mutually beneficial from the political point of view because they boost the legitimacy of specific governors and consolidate their influence. As regards the president, his position in the system had remained unchallenged, and was only recently undermined by Prigozhin’s mutiny. During the visits to the regions, he receives public displays of support from the local elites, which in turn help him to consolidate his

ability to control them. Moreover, these meetings are elements of a strategy to build the image of the Russian leader as a public politician, which was consciously adopted in the wake of the failed revolt.

The amended law mentioned above, which enables the governors to establish and supervise specialised armed companies (which are *de facto* regional military companies), can also be interpreted as a sign of Putin's confidence in the heads of the regions.

6. The Kremlin's attitude towards the 'turbo-patriots'

However, around a month after the mutiny, a warning signal was sent out to the 'turbo-patriots', the radical nationalist-imperialist groups who have accused the Kremlin of pursuing an excessively lenient and ineffective policy towards Ukraine and the West, and of failing to conduct successful military activity. On 21 July the former FSB *spetsnaz* colonel Igor Girkin (Strelkov), one of the most recognisable representatives of these ultra-patriotic groups and an ardent critic of the Kremlin, was arrested. He had gone unpunished for a long time, most likely due to protection from the FSB, but he has now officially been charged with "publicly inciting to extremist activity using the internet", a crime punishable by imprisonment for up to five years. The most likely immediate reason for Girkin's detention was the fact that in one of his social media posts he had referred to the president – whose image at that time had already been undermined by Prigozhin's mutiny – as "a cowardly mediocrity, who should not rule for another six years because the country will not survive it". This was a reference to plans announced by the Kremlin for 2024, wherein Putin intends to stand for another term as president, in violation of the constitution. It should be noted that Girkin's case has been classified, which may suggest that the authorities view it as sensitive; after all, Girkin has knowledge of the crimes Putin's regime has committed in Ukraine, as he himself was involved in them since the launch of the Russian invasion in 2014. It may also indicate that the Kremlin is seeking to intimidate Girkin's supporters more effectively.

At the same time, his detention is most likely an element of a broader strategy adopted by the Russian authorities to pacify the radical groups, whom until recently they had treated as allies in pursuing an aggressive foreign policy and implementing a neo-totalitarian domestic policy. **Following Prigozhin's mutiny, these groups began to be viewed as potential threats.**

Girkin's detention was not directly linked with the mutiny, as he had often spoken out against Prigozhin; but it may have resulted from the fear that after the leader of Wagner Group had been removed from Russia, the former rivalry between the different factions of 'turbo-patriots', which so far has posed no threat to the Kremlin, could give way to greater consolidation among these groups. As a result of a successful elimination of voices speaking from liberal-democratic positions and condemning the regime from the political space, the authorities began to view the ultra-patriots as the only remaining group with the potential to inspire social discontent. Meanwhile, the Kremlin sought to hush up the topic of the war and the failures on the front line, and to convince Russian citizens that the socio-economic and political situation was normalising. As the rise in Prigozhin's popularity had previously demonstrated, a portion of the regime's social base (mainly a new group of beneficiaries of the war, who have moved up the social ladder due to the generous salaries and compensation offered to soldiers and their families) is becoming receptive to more radical slogans. **However, the weak response of the 'turbo-patriots' to Girkin's arrest and the death of the mutiny's leader proves that their potential has now been effectively neutralised.** Similarly, voices critical of the war's progress have also been eliminated from the government-controlled media. Instead, an optimistic narrative highlighting favourable prospects for victory has prevailed. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Kremlin will decide to step up repression against the 'turbo-patriots' - including out of fear of a possible reaction from the public.

7. Public sentiment and the Kremlin's response

The results of opinion polls carried out in the neo-totalitarian regime in Russia cannot provide reliable data on public sentiment, although they can indicate certain trends. Opinion polls conducted by the Levada Centre, an independent sociological research organisation, during Prigozhin's mutiny and in the weeks that followed it showed that **after a brief sharp drop, the overall assessment of the Kremlin's policy has returned to its previous level, and Putin's approval ratings have not declined at all;** the president still enjoys the confidence of more than 80% of respondents. A temporary decline was only recorded as regards the public's opinions on the future of the Russian state. In July, the proportion of positive responses was very similar to the level recorded before the mutiny (66% versus 67% in May, after a temporary drop to 61% in June). However, as already mentioned, immediately after the revolt the Russian leadership adopted a strategy of presenting Putin as a public politician who is close to the citizens. This was probably intended to offset

the popularity enjoyed by Prigozhin, who had skilfully presented an anti-elitist image of a 'simple man'.

In contrast, following the mutiny support for the rebel leader halved compared with that recorded before 24 June, standing at 29% (a poll conducted by Russian Field, an independent social research organisation, has produced similar findings). This means that it continued to be relatively high despite the sharp decline. The very fact that Prigozhin was included in the popularity rankings was more meaningful in the context of the public's actual sentiments than the usual declared support for the president. In a closed question, 22% of the respondents said that they trusted Prigozhin (while 76% had confidence in Putin). 10% of the respondents declared that they would vote for him in the presidential election (this proportion also fell by half). Almost half of those surveyed supported the view that his accusations against the army were at least partly justified, while two thirds continued to have a positive opinion of the Wagner Group members as combatants in Ukraine. Sociologists argue that what convinced many citizens to turn away from Prigozhin was his rebellion in which he challenged Putin and the state authorities. More than two thirds of those surveyed (69%) believed that the mercenary leader had no chance of carrying out a successful coup, and 73% said that regime change by force was impossible in Russia (the opposite view was supported by 18% of the respondents, a big proportion by Russian standards).¹ According to unofficial reports, polls carried by the Presidential Administration showed a 9–14% decrease in confidence in the head of state (these findings were reportedly presented during a meeting on 29 June, although more recent information is not available).

Information obtained by journalists of Verstka, an independent news website, in interviews with residents of Russian towns and cities shows that most of those who supported Prigozhin during his mutiny said that their backing for the warlord was due to their weariness about the current system of government and their longing for an 'alternative leadership' (the mutiny had sparked some hope for change in their minds). They also appreciated Prigozhin for being close to the people, speaking in a straightforward, understandable manner and not being afraid to raise difficult issues.²

¹ 'Мятеж 23–24 июня в восприятии россиян', Левада-Центр, 3 July 2023, levada.ru; 'Евгений Пригожин: до и после мятежа', Russian Field, russianfield.com; 'Падение авторитета Евгения Пригожина и отношение к использованию наёмников и заключённых в военных действиях', Левада-Центр, 29 June 2023, levada.ru.

² А. Рыжкова, Р. Логинова, Р. Гималова, '«Я не его поддерживаю, а его намерение всё тут разломать»', Вёрстка, 30 June 2023, verstka.media.

Although official propaganda was reticent about informing the public of this development, reports of the Wagner Group founder's death did reach an overwhelming majority of Russians. A Levada Centre poll published in early September showed that 89% of the respondents were aware of this fact. While 26% of them believed that the plane crash was a fatal accident, another 20% supported the view that the authorities had taken revenge on Prigozhin and 16% argued that he had staged his own death. In another Levada Centre survey conducted in August, after the businessman's death, his level of support had increased to 39%.³

The Kremlin made every effort to keep information about Prigozhin's funeral secret (he was buried on 29 August in the Porokhovskiy cemetery in Saint Petersburg), most likely fearing mass-scale rallies in support of the rebel. Despite this, makeshift memorials were set up in numerous Russian cities to commemorate him and the other Wagner Group members who had died in the crash. The initiative was repeated on 2 October, in line with the Russian tradition of remembering the dead on the fortieth day after their death. In most cases, the authorities did not react to these events.

³ 'Запомнившиеся события августа, смерть Пригожина', Левада-Центр, 1 September 2023, levada.ru.

II. THE SITUATION OF PRIGOZHIN AND HIS ASSETS FOLLOWING THE MUTINY

1. The Kremlin's attitude towards the mutiny's leader and the Wagner fighters: the political and propaganda sphere

According to some reports, on 29 June a three-hour meeting was held in the Kremlin between the president and members of the Wagner Group, including Prigozhin. This was only officially confirmed on 10 July, when information on this meeting was shared with the French media. That probably indicates the Russian leadership's intention to conceal the event from the public, since Putin was talking to a man he had previously referred to as a traitor. Rumours suggest that agreements were made during that meeting regarding how the Wagner fighters would continue to be used to promote Moscow's interests, and most probably the future of their leader's assets. In addition, the Wagner mercenaries also declared their loyalty to the head of state. The Kremlin presented the forced reporting of the meeting as evidence that the domestic situation had normalised under Putin's wise leadership, and that the idea of unity in support of Russia's interests had prevailed over individual conflicts. However, it should be assumed that a significant portion of the law-enforcement and 'civilian' establishments had negative opinions on the compromises made with the 'traitor'.

Immediately after the end of the mutiny, the state-controlled media attempted to downplay its significance and highlight its positive aspects. It emphasised the Russian public's alleged strong opposition to the attitude of the mutineers, as well as the unchallenged support for the president from both elite and society. According to the government media, it was due to these two factors that the revolt ultimately failed. At the same time, a major media campaign was launched to discredit Prigozhin as a common criminal and fraudster who had made a fortune at the expense of the Russian state and its citizens. The main state television channels presented coordinated reports highlighting the details of the warlord's criminal past and his underhand dealings involving illegal transactions to buy up land and historic properties in Saint Petersburg, the elimination of his business competitors in the catering sector, and his utilisation of the media he had owned to manipulate public opinion. The state media also aired reports containing footage of searches carried out at his place of residence.

Russian propaganda outlets reported on the death of the Wagner Group leader in a perfunctory manner. On the one hand, they argued that the crash was

an accident, while on the other hand they left some room for speculation suggesting that it was an act of revenge by the Kremlin for his betrayal. Prigozhin's image as a patriot and a 'tribune of the people' was further damaged by Putin's above-mentioned speech at the Valdai Club, in which he not only suggested that the Wagner Group's leadership had abused banned substances, but also accused them of treating the fighters unfairly, including by depriving them of social benefits. The media aired this statement repeatedly.

This message was intended to deconstruct the image of Prigozhin as a statesman and defender of the fatherland that he himself had built up. At some point, state propaganda even supported him in creating this image; government media even referred to him as a 'new Minin or Pozharsky', that is, as a commander who could lead a nationwide uprising. As a consequence, he had enjoyed considerable popularity in certain social groups prior to the revolt, particularly in the actively pro-war circles, and his criticisms of the Russian military were viewed as justified (see above).

The official narrative also did not comment on the rumours regarding the alleged resignations of several high-ranking army commanders who according to independent media had been linked with the mutiny. This was a highly uncomfortable topic for the Kremlin. However, government media did briefly report on those Wagner fighters who first went to Belarus (it was argued that this was a logical and pre-planned move resulting from the need to boost Belarus's security in the face of the aggression that Poland and NATO were allegedly preparing). According to propaganda coverage the fighters, in line with the proposal from the Russian authorities, eagerly joined the ranks of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation to continue their service in the state structures, which offered fair employment standards. Russian propaganda continues to spread a positive narrative about the mercenaries, although at present it is keeping them distinct from the figure of Prigozhin. Following the plane crash, in what was undoubtedly a deliberate and coordinated move, the propaganda outlets stopped mentioning the Wagner Group leader. Also, a noticeable change in the tone of reporting on the war in Ukraine occurred after Prigozhin's death - it became more optimistic. According to reports now, the 'operation' is going according to plan and Russia's victory is imminent. At the same time, message discipline among the propagandists has been increased. Any criticism of the progress of the war or of the army, which in the past had been voiced in state television and which coincided with statements made by the rebel leader, is now prohibited.

2. The economic assets

Prigozhin's son Pavel has officially inherited his businesses and property assets. At the end of September, the media reported that the transfer of property rights had been carried out on the basis of the warlord's last will.⁴ It mainly covered the assets grouped in the Konkord holding company, which includes companies incorporated by Prigozhin to provide services in the catering sector (catering companies, restaurants), as well as the construction-investment and retail sectors (including a chain of tourist gift shops). The core of this business group is the Concord Management & Consulting LLC company, which was established in 1997 and operated in the catering and construction sectors. Its clients mainly included state administration bodies which ordered catering services for the military as well as various educational facilities.

It is worth noting that some businesses active in the retail and real estate sectors were already officially registered in the name of Prigozhin's relatives before his death (his wife Lyubov, son Pavel, and daughters Polina and Veronika). The media reported that there was a conflict within the family over the fact that his son was to inherit all of Prigozhin's assets, in line with his last will.

Interestingly, even before the crash rumours were being spread in the Russian media that the Wagner Group leader might be stripped of control of some of his businesses and that the defence ministry might terminate its contracts for food supplies signed with the warlord's catering companies.⁵ However, these rumours were not confirmed during his lifetime. In their analysis of public tenders, Russian journalists found out that companies linked with the mercenary leader had no real difficulty in continuing to win state contracts.⁶ According to a report in August, within a month of the revolt these businesses won contracts worth at least 2 bn roubles (around \$22 mn)⁷ concerning catering services for public institutions such as schools and hospitals.

Despite this, the authorities decided to target these companies and tarnish their image. During a meeting with the military on 27 June, Putin ordered the state

⁴ 'Port опубликовал нотариальное завещание Пригожина. Все имущество достается его сыну - список', The Insider, 30 September 2023, theins.ru.

⁵ 'Минобороны, возможно, расторгло контракт с «Конкордом» Пригожина', Радио Свобода, 2 July 2023, svoboda.org.

⁶ А. Ларина, 'RTVI: компании Пригожина после мятежа заключили контракты на миллиард рублей', Коммерсантъ, 12 July 2023, kommersant.ru.

⁷ 'Компании Пригожина за месяц после мятежа заключили госконтрактов не менее чем на 2 млрд рублей', Агентство. Новости, 3 August 2023, t.me/agenstvonews.

agencies to audit the documents of the Konkord holding. This can be interpreted as the Russian leadership's reaction to the Wagner Group's revolt. Putin cited the need to check whether Prigozhin's subsidiary companies had been involved in the embezzlement of state funds as motivating his decision. According to the president, between May 2022 and May 2023 the holding had won tenders for the supply of food to the army and earned 80 bn roubles providing these services (almost \$900 mn according to the exchange rate valid at the end of June). On 2 July, in his programme 'Vesti Nedeli', aired by the state-run Rossiya 1 TV channel, propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov said that Konkord had provided services worth a total of 845 bn roubles under its state contracts (around \$9.4 bn according to the exchange rate valid at that time).

On 1 July, a sign reading 'ChVK Wagner V Centre' was removed from the façade of the Morskaya Stolitsa office complex. Prigozhin allegedly owned office premises there which he had leased to business people involved in 'developing Russia's defence potential'. According to a Wagner Group press release regarding this fact, the centre will continue to operate, albeit in a 'new format' and in a 'different space'.

At the beginning of October, the media reported that the RBE Group company had taken over Konkord's contracts to supply food to the army.⁸ RBE Group is controlled by Andrei Shokin, a Samara-based businessman, who has previously provided services to the defence ministry. His company had provided catering services to the military until 2013, when the ministry began to cooperate with Prigozhin's businesses. According to the Russian media, the selection of the RBE Group was motivated by the size of the tenders, as not every company operating on the Russian market would be able to meet these requirements.

3. The media assets

Prigozhin managed to build up a media empire with backing from the Kremlin, and which acted in the Kremlin's interest. As a result of the mutiny, its main media outlets have now ceased to operate. Russian media reported that Prigozhin was forced to divest these assets, although as yet there has been no reliable detailed information on this topic.

During the mutiny, on Saturday 24 June, the websites established by the Patriot holding company owned by Prigozhin stopped working. This holding is a media

⁸ Д. Андрианова, 'RBE Group окормляет военных', Коммерсантъ, 5 October 2023, [kommersant.ru](https://www.kommersant.ru).

sector conglomerate which includes the Russian News Agency FAN (RIA FAN), various news websites such as *Politika Segodnya*, *Ekonomika Segodnya*, *Nevskiy Novosti* and *Narodnye Novosti*, and the Internet Research Agency, which is frequently referred to as a ‘troll farm’. According to Fontanka,⁹ their servers were probably blocked by the secret services during searches carried out in the wake of the mutiny. This was when the national security bodies raided all locations linked with Prigozhin’s business activity, particularly the headquarters of the Patriot media group in Saint Petersburg. Since 26 June, when the mutiny was suppressed, there have been no updates on Prigozhin’s press service Telegram channel which had previously published his speeches. However, some social media accounts linked with the Wagner Group continue to operate, for example those which report on the mercenary group’s time in Belarus and its activity abroad.

On 30 June the media reported¹⁰ that Prigozhin had dissolved the Patriot holding, which RIA FAN’s CEO Yevgeny Zubarev later confirmed in an official statement. On the same day, the *Nevskiy Novosti* and *Ekonomika Segodnya* news agencies announced the termination of their activities, and their websites ceased to be updated. Alongside this, Russia’s media control agency Roskomnadzor stated that it had blocked the broadcasting activity of all outlets belonging to the Wagner Group’s founder. The press release did not cite any reasons for restricting access to these media outlets. The fact that Prigozhin’s businesses have indeed been shut down and their staff fired was given probable corroboration in a social media post by Margarita Simonyan, one of the Kremlin’s chief propagandists. In this post she called for the former employees of Prigozhin’s media company to be employed by the state-controlled media, as in her opinion these individuals cannot be blamed for the situation. At the same time, the Bell website suggested that Patriot will continue to operate in some form and that a search for a new owner is underway.¹¹ Putin’s friend, the businessman Yuri Kovalchuk, has been named as a potential new owner. However, no details regarding this proposal have since been put forward.

Similarly, there is too little confirmed information on the activities of the pro-Kremlin ‘troll farm’ (the ‘Internet Research Agency’ located in Saint Petersburg), which became notorious for activities such as interfering in the 2016

⁹ Д. Александров, ‘СМИ медиагруппы Евгения Пригожина стали недоступны для пользователей’, Фонтанка.ру, 24 June 2023, fontanka.ru.

¹⁰ Г. Тадтаев, В. Гордеев, ‘Пригожин распустил медиахолдинг «Патриот»’, РБК, 30 June 2023, rbc.ru.

¹¹ И. Панкратова, ‘Фабрике троллей и медиаимперии Евгения Пригожина ищут нового владельца’, The Bell, 29 June 2023, thebell.io.

US presidential election by manipulating the sentiments of American voters via social networks. In 2018, the US Department of Justice accused Russia of meddling in the election process, and in 2022 Prigozhin admitted this. After the mutiny, the Agentstvo website reported that the Wagner Group leader may have lost control of the agency as early as May 2023. This was presumed on the basis of a shift in the tone of the content published there by internet trolls, who had stopped supporting him. However, the exact details of the 'farm's' present activity have not been disclosed, which seems understandable given the sensitivity of the sphere in which it operates. It should be assumed that, in an era of escalating information warfare with the West, the Kremlin has not abandoned such a useful instrument, but has rather handed it over to another person or group. It is very likely that the agency is now supervised by the secret services (the FSB and the foreign intelligence service).

4. The military assets

Prigozhin's mutiny disrupted the Wagner Group's former organisational structure. The mercenaries left their base at the Molkino training ground in Krasnodar *krai* and some of their field camp equipment was transported to Belarus. According to estimates provided by news channels then controlled by the group's founder, around 10,000 Wagner fighters declared their loyalty to their leader. In July 2023, a portion of this group (up to 5000 individuals) was re-deployed to Belarus. A field camp at the village of Tsel became their main base. There were also reports that the mercenaries were using warehouse facilities located at a former military town in Poplavy near Asipovichy (Mahiliou oblast). It cannot be ruled out that light armaments were transported there from Russia. On 19 July, the leader of the Wagner Group arrived at the camp alongside the group's commander Dmitry Utkin. In a statement, he insisted that the group's current activity in Africa would not be cut back and that his 'company' continued to be open to cooperation, as long as this "did not undermine Russia's interests". Since Prigozhin did not name a formal successor, his death has made it easier for the defence ministry to gradually integrate his mercenaries into regular army units or 'volunteer units' as long as they agree to sign a contract. In September, Ukrainian intelligence confirmed the report that only 500 to 1000 Wagner fighters were still in Belarus at that time, and that the rest had either returned to Russia or been redeployed to Africa. Sergei Chubko, alias 'Pioneer', has been appointed as the group's commander in Belarus. Previously, he had participated in fighting in Syria, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali and Libya.

The training activity provided to the Belarusian army and the internal troops of the Interior Ministry took on the form of a propaganda campaign, which Alyaksandr Lukashenka initially used as a tool to scare NATO; the Wagner Group's news channels have spread information suggesting that the fighters took part in the training of Belarusian soldiers at various locations including the Hozha training ground near Hrodna. On 11 September, the Ukrainian government announced that the Belarusian regime had attempted to convince the mercenaries to sign contracts with the GardServis security company, which was established in 2019 under the supervision of Viktor Sheiman, Lukashenka's advisor on Africa. Its employees are trained at the Dinamo football club's camp in Marina Horka near Minsk, where a unit of the Interior Ministry's internal troops is stationed. In Russia itself, recruitment to the Wagner Group was halted shortly after the mutiny. Prior to the revolt's failure, the group had been looking for specialists in handling artillery weapons and operating unmanned aerial vehicles, individuals who would be ready to fight in assault troops, as well as medical staff and translators from Arabic and French.

Putin's decision of 29 September corroborates the reports that the mercenaries have been 'dispersed'. In this decision, the president ordered the Wagner Group's former chief of staff, retired Colonel Andrei Troshev, alias 'Sedoy', to start forming volunteer units which could be used in operations against Ukraine. The formation of these units is to be overseen by deputy defence minister Yevkurov. Troshev, who did not support Prigozhin's rebellion, had previously been in charge of tasks such as logistical support and prisoner recruitment. Entrusting him with the organisation of 'volunteer troops' is intended to encourage the Wagner fighters to sign contracts with the defence ministry and carry out orders from regular army commanders. It should be noted that Troshev is not expected to take over all of Prigozhin's businesses which provide food supplies to the army, such as the Konkord company, or the 'troll farms' located in Saint Petersburg. His task is to use the mercenaries to fight on the Ukrainian front. At present, there are no indications that he will be supervising the mercenary operations in Africa; control over these is most likely being exercised by Russian military intelligence. The National Guard, which is keen to increase its combat capability, is also interested in accepting the Wagner fighters into service. It will probably create 'assault units' within its ranks, which will be used not only in fighting in Ukraine, but also to monitor the situation in Russia's regions bordering on Ukraine, which are threatened by the activity of sabotage and reconnaissance groups.

On 5 October, Pavel Prigozhin announced that he had taken over the management of the Wagner Group, and promised that the mercenaries would soon return to the Ukrainian front. These are to be commanded by Mikhail Vatanin, the former head of the group's security service. The attitude of the rebel leader's son suggests that he will attempt to hold onto as many of his father's assets as possible. Anton Yelizarov, alias 'Lotos', was one of the Wagner Group's field commanders; he joined the group in 2014, following his dismissal from the armed forces on disciplinary grounds. This man has attempted to retain his independent supervision of at least some of the Wagner mercenaries. On 29 September, he confirmed the reports that Troshev had left the group, and stressed that he had not previously been part of the so-called 'council of commanders'. Yelizarov's statements seem to indicate that the Wagner Group's top echelons remain disoriented, and have adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

The mercenary units continue to be active in Africa. In statements to pan-African media shortly before his death, Prigozhin stressed that no reduction in the 'personnel' present there was envisaged, and that the group was meeting all of its former commitments. The Wagner fighters who have remained in Belarus and Russia are receiving job offers involving their redeployment to Africa. The exact size of the contingent currently operating in Africa is unclear; in February 2023 it was estimated at around 5000 men. Since the death of the Wagner Group's founder, there have been no reports suggesting that its forces might have withdrawn from Africa, nor that their size has changed. The mercenaries are still openly operating in at least four African countries, and their general activity may cover more than ten countries in total. In Mali, they are performing tasks linked to the protection of the local authorities, carrying out combat operations, training soldiers and participating in business undertakings focused on gold mining. In Sudan, they are involved in gold trafficking, and have assisted the Rapid Support Forces (a paramilitary group responsible for border control and smuggling migrants), which has been in internal conflict with the state armed forces since April 2023. Since 2018, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, the President of the Central African Republic, has relied on the assistance provided by the Wagner fighters in his attempts to stay in power. In exchange for their service, the Wagner mercenaries are granted licences to mine gold, diamonds and other minerals. In Libya, the Wagner Group members are supporting Marshal Khalifa Haftar, a warlord who is in opposition to the UN-recognised government in Tripoli. The Libyan National Army he commands is in control of the eastern part of the country; this is also where several hundred Russian mercenaries are stationed to protect military bases and oil fields.

In the Middle East, the future of the Wagner Group's several hundred-strong contingent in Syria is uncertain. It is involved in protecting the Syrian oil installations and is taking part in the civil war on the side of the Bashar al-Assad regime. During Prigozhin's mutiny, Russian military police allegedly arrested several Wagner commanders and searched the group's offices in cooperation with Syrian intelligence. It is believed that the mercenaries were offered new contracts under which they would report directly to the Russian defence ministry, and those who refused were taken out of the country on Russian aircraft. The local branch of the Wagner Group has denied reports suggesting that some of its employees had been arrested.

Reports that the Russian defence ministry has made efforts to take control of the Wagner Group's operations in Africa and Syria have been corroborated by trips the deputy minister made in August and September to countries where the group operates, as well as to Burkina Faso, which is controlled by a military junta. Moreover, in September, Marshal Haftar paid a visit to Moscow.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

1. The political sphere

There are no indications that the rebellion was an act of provocation orchestrated by the Kremlin (for example, in order to test the elite's loyalty to the president). Interpretations of this type are still present in the media sphere, and will continue to be spread to reinforce the view that the presidential centre of power continues to hold control of all political and social processes ongoing in Russia. However, this conviction has recently been undermined both in Russia and abroad.

The intention to demonstrate that the authorities are in full control of the internal political situation will continue to be a priority for them. According to the available information, the reputational damage caused by the revolt to the system and the head of state has successfully been mitigated. Russia's political and economic elite generally viewed Prigozhin's death as an event which restored stability. At present, the administrative apparatus is focusing on comprehensive preparations for the presidential election planned for March 2024, in which Putin is expected to run (in violation of the constitution) and win again.

The secret services may take advantage of Putin's mounting doubts regarding the loyalty of the political and economic elite to launch a 'vetting' of this group's attitudes. This may mean that individuals who are critical of the effects of Putin's policies are removed from public life; for example, compromising information could be leaked about them. It is worth noting that there have been no major personnel reshuffles in the Russian Armed Forces following the revolt. Some commanding officers supported Prigozhin, or at least were relatively well-disposed towards him, because they were aware of the ineptitude that Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of General Staff of the Russian Federation, had displayed in commanding combat operations in Ukraine. However, the defence ministry's leadership has decided to refrain from carrying out a purge among those suspected of supporting the rebel leader. Although they have effectively suffered a symbolic punishment (this was the motive for Surovikin's dismissal), they continue to serve, and are being used to carry out tasks devised by the ministry.

The regional governors' declarations of loyalty (and, less frequently, their real actions) during the mutiny proved sufficient for the Kremlin. Any upcoming

personnel reshuffles will not be directly linked to the governors' attitude during the Wagner Group revolt; instead they will be motivated by the authorities' overall assessment of their activities and the current political needs, especially as regards preparations for the presidential election.

For some time, the mutiny was viewed as proof of the weakness of Putin himself and the political system as a whole, which propaganda was forced to cover up. Reporting on these events posed major problems to the propaganda outlets. The fact that they took up the topic almost instantaneously emphasises its importance in the context of Russia's domestic situation, and proves that the Kremlin did indeed fear a decline in public sentiment. However, despite working at full speed, the propagandists have failed to create a coherent, convincing narrative regarding the mutiny or Prigozhin himself. This is because inconsistencies in the message being spread, the differences of opinion between the commentators, and the concealment of inconvenient facts – none of which are usually seen within the government media in such intensity – became apparent. The propagandists' coverage of the events deliberately contained numerous oblique statements about the causes of the Wagner Group founder's death (the official investigation has also failed to produce any clear findings). This in turn has left some room for speculation that Prigozhin's elimination may have been a punishment he deserved for betraying the homeland and the president. Propaganda outlets attempted to improve the government's image, which had been damaged as a result of the revolt, by emphasising that the government has all the necessary means at its disposal to control the situation both within the elite and in society, and that it would not tolerate any displays of insubordination towards the head of state in the future.

The Kremlin's reaction to the rebellion may have significant, albeit likely delayed, consequences for the regime in the coming years. The compromise reached with the 'traitors' has shown that Putin can, in certain circumstances, be influenced by the use of force (which particularly undermines his position as the leader in a system based on 'mafia logic'), and that the power apparatus is much weaker than the elite had presumed. Therefore, the taboo and the myths surrounding the president for more than two decades have been debunked (at least to some degree). Significant limitations were revealed in his traditional model of managing the situation among the power-holding cliques, which involves orchestrating 'controlled conflicts' between specific interest groups. In this context, the elimination of the traitors was intended to restore order and obedience on the part of those who questioned Putin's ability to continue to dominate and control the system. There are many indications

that this has been successful. However, the crackdown on the radical patriots (Prigozhin, Girkin) may also have a negative side-effect involving a decline in the regime's ability to adapt to future challenges, should criticism of the establishment be suppressed more radically than before.

Although for the time being there are no indications that anyone may have attempted to take advantage of the Kremlin's temporary weakness, this may change if the Ukrainian counter-offensive proves successful or public discontent rises. However, no change will be possible unless the West increases the quantity and quality of its military aid to Kyiv and boosts the effectiveness of its sanctions regime. If the circumstances do change, another stress test of a magnitude similar to the June mutiny could lead to a reshuffle in the top echelons of power, which may (although it need not) provoke a more profound systemic change and a revision of Russia's external policy. In the event of the outbreak of another rebellion, no attempts to negotiate with Putin should be expected, because the death of the Wagner Group leader has demonstrated that any guarantees offered by the president are worthless.

As always, the rigged presidential election will be a test of the system's viability. It should be expected that measures to neutralise potential risks will be taken, especially as the head of state's suspicion and distrust of the elite have likely increased significantly as a result of the revolt. It cannot be ruled out that a personnel reshuffle and ostentatious acts of repression (including on corruption charges) will be carried out to intimidate the establishment and rebuild Putin's image as a tough leader.

It is likely that the topic of the rebellion will emerge in the election campaign. Considering the subjects of state propaganda and the causes of Prigozhin's popularity, the narrative will likely rely on two motives. Firstly, Putin will likely be presented as the country's sole defender against the possibility of civil war. At the same time the West may be sent a fearmongering message that the country's nuclear arsenal may fall into the hands of criminal groups if the president is toppled. Secondly, the regime will likely use populist themes regarding the need to discipline the ruling elite more effectively to serve the nation, and will back them up with further generous social transfers for the population from the federal budget.

The Russian public's reactions to the revolt have once again proved that it is passive and indifferent to the domestic political situation, and manifests a traditionally high level of support for the authorities. Although public sentiment

may be used as a tool in the manoeuvring within the establishment, it will not become the driving force behind any possible change in Russia.

2. The economic sphere

The cooperation between the state apparatus and the catering companies formerly owned by Prigozhin has not stopped in the aftermath of the rebellion, which suggests that these assets – which after all were of minor political significance – were considerably less important to the authorities than the media outlets. Back then, Konkord was still winning tenders for the provision of catering services to educational and medical facilities. The Kremlin never attempted to strip Prigozhin of his assets, and after his death it did not interfere in the transferral of his companies' ownership to his son. Despite this, the fact that the president inquired into the holding company's finances (and the propaganda message which accompanied these reports) while he was still alive were part of the state media's attempt to eliminate the warlord from public consciousness.

The fact that some of the Wagner Group leader's business assets were allowed to continue operating in a relatively undisturbed manner may indicate that what mattered to the authorities was the intention to ensure the continuity of the catering services being provided to the ministry of defence. This cooperation was still ongoing as of October 2023, probably because replacing Konkord with other similar service providers would not have been an easy task. Some contracts were only terminated and transferred to Konkord's competitors more than three months after the revolt, perhaps because of the requirement for the new contractor to adapt to the scale of the cooperation. The absence of information regarding the fate of Prigozhin's other assets suggests that this component of the warlord's inheritance – that is, his companies operating in the catering, property development and hotel sectors – is irrelevant from the point of view of the ruling elite. As long as Pavel Prigozhin does not display any political ambitions, it should be expected that the authorities will not in any way interfere in the future of the assets he inherited from his father.

3. The military sphere

The death of the Wagner Group's founder, and the fact that the group has lost the logistical support that the Russian Armed Forces provided it, has put an end to the operation of its military component. The Kremlin's recent actions towards the mercenaries suggest that final measures have been taken

to decide on their future activity. Following a selection process and an assessment of the individuals' attitude during the mutiny, some of them will be re-deployed to the Ukrainian front. The Wagner Group units are unlikely to retain their former independent status. The newly formed units will most likely be assigned to those units which are already involved in fighting on the front. At the same time, the Kremlin still needs well-trained mercenaries for its operations in Africa. It remains unclear who will benefit most from the division of Prigozhin's military legacy. There are many indications that it will be the Russian Armed Forces (in the context of the war in Ukraine) and military intelligence (in connection with its activity in Africa). The National Guard may also absorb some Wagner fighters, while others may be incorporated into other military companies controlled by the FSB.

The plans for the Wagner Group to operate as an independent military formation stationed in Belarus are no longer valid. Those Wagner mercenaries who are still there are now under the control of the regime in Minsk; they have been assigned to Belarusian army units to provide them with combat training. It should be assumed that their continued presence at the training grounds in the vicinity of the Polish and Lithuania borders is an element of a psychological operation launched by Lukashenka to fuel concern in Warsaw and Vilnius that the ex-Wagner fighters may be used to carry out border provocations. There are also indications that they will also be ostentatiously deployed in locations near the border with Ukraine; their possible use as sabotage and reconnaissance groups cannot be ruled out either.

The future fate of the Wagner Group's military component is directly linked to the scale of Russia's ventures in Africa. The mercenaries who are now supervised by Russian military intelligence will continue to operate because they play an important part in satisfying the Kremlin's political (support for regimes which are favourable to Russia), economic (protection of economic interests, exploitation of natural resources) and military needs & ambitions.

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