The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

‘We Were Called In for a Meeting and Handed Weapons’: How the Russian Elites Survived the Prigozhin Rebellion

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June 28, 2023



Yevgeny Prigozhin, owner of the Wagner Group inside the Russian Military Southern District headquarters in Rostov-on-Don. **Wagner Group / Planet Pix via ZUMA Press Wire / TASS**

The Russian George Soros: that's what President Vladimir Putin called Yevgeny Prigozhin in a 2018 interview. At the time, the Kremlin stressed that it had no connection to Prigozhin's projects.

Five years later, in June 2023, the “Russian Soros” and his private army seized a military facility in southern Russia and headed toward Moscow with arms in hand. Putin considered this an armed rebellion and a betrayal. After the rebellion ended, the Russian president admitted that Prigozhin and his mercenaries had been living off the state's resources this whole time.

Russian propaganda, following Putin's lead, claims that society rallied around the president during the rebellion. This is, of course, not true. Russians did not try to stop the column of mercenaries on its way to the capital, nor did anyone take to the streets. Instead, they were taking out cash, stocking up on food and fuel, and worrying about themselves.

But what was happening in the corridors of power and among the Russian elite during the days of the rebellion? What did those in power think of Prigozhin before the rebellion, and were they genuinely united in supporting the president during it? We spoke with our contacts within Putin's circle, the Kremlin, the government, and state-owned companies. Here's what they told us.

Before the rebellion: "He has ambitions for advancement."

Prigozhin has publicly criticized the Defense Ministry since last fall, when the Russian army started losing some of the territories it had seized in Ukraine. For example, in October, he said: “Many of those who are so-called 'professional' military personnel haven't learned anything except how to strut in heels, wear trinkets, and write pretty reports.”

Prigozhin's rhetoric gradually became harsher and more targeted.

In February, he accused Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov of wanting to destroy the Wagner private military company (PMC), claiming that the Defense Ministry had denied them ammunition. "Shoigu, Gerasimov! Where the f*** are the munitions?!" the leader of the Wagner Group shouted. In the midst of the war, a person with no official government position or power, but long acquainted with Putin, was accusing the country's previously untouchable military leadership of inefficiency almost daily.

Why does Prigozhin allow himself to do this, and why doesn't Putin rein him in? We posed these questions to officials of various ranks in early June, when the Wagner Group withdrew from the front lines but Prigozhin continued his provocative outbursts.

No one could say for certain. However, our most experienced interviewees were confident that Putin did not sanction Prigozhin's attacks on the Defense Ministry leadership. The president, of course, is aware of these outbursts, but does not reprimand Prigozhin because the Wagner PMC is fighting more effectively than the official army, they explained.

Just three weeks ago, an employee of the presidential administration involved in the work of the Security Council described the future rebel as follows: "He fights effectively, people are dying there. He has the right to speak out; it's his emotions. Why not? We have freedom of speech."

Many praised Prigozhin's organizational abilities.

"He's definitely not an ordinary guy, not stupid. No matter how much money you have, you still need brains, and he organized a huge operation. But the closer we get to peace, the less such people will be needed," predicted a source close to the government three weeks ago. He compared Prigozhin to the revolutionary terrorist Yakov Blumkin, known for assassinating the German ambassador Mirbach, which sparked an uprising of Left Socialist-Revolutionaries against the Bolsheviks.

"He has ambitions for advancement because he successfully carries out the tasks given to him. These are his personal ambitions, both political and professional, in business," the head of one of the largest Russian state-owned companies said of Prigozhin's behavior.

The Russian mercenary leader's criticism of the Defense Ministry widely resonated with the civilian elite. "Objectively, he is right in many ways. What I see aligns with his words, at least regarding the organization of work with the troops, logistical and managerial matters," said a high-ranking official who knows Putin well.

Another source close to the government noted that although many people in power might agree with the essence of Prigozhin's claims, few sympathize with him personally. "People send each other videos of him as a joke, free entertainment. Many agree with what he says about the half-collapsed army, but it's not sympathy for him because, after all, he's still a bandit."

Influential people close to the Kremlin claimed that Prigozhin has significantly fewer opportunities to influence Putin than Shoigu. "Shoigu is in contact with Putin several times a day, while Prigozhin, despite having Putin's support, doesn't have the opportunity to speak with him once a week or even once a month," said a source close to the Kremlin.

Uprising: "Everyone is f*ing losing it and doomscrolling."**

- "Do you understand what's going on?"

- "I have no idea."

This is how a typical exchange of our messages with Russian officials and government managers looked on Friday evening, when Prigozhin announced his campaign in Rostov. Some didn't respond at all.

At that moment, no one fully grasped how serious the situation was. But by Saturday morning, a group of Prigozhin's fighters had seized the Defense Ministry's headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, while another headed to Moscow. Putin recorded an emergency video address, accusing the Wagner Group of military mutiny and treason. The FSB and Defense Ministry demanded that Wagner fighters lay down their arms. Moscow, the Moscow region and the Voronezh region were placed under a counter-terrorism regime.

Among those in high and mid-level positions in the Russian ruling class, the main feeling on Saturday morning and afternoon was confusion about what was happening and how this could be possible. "Everyone is f***ing losing it and doomscrolling," one high-ranking source close to the government replied when asked how things were going. "We don't receive any internal information. No one understands what's happening and what needs to be done," a federal official said.

Starting Friday evening, some civilian officials, government managers, and their family members started booking tickets out of Moscow, according to a close acquaintance of a Russian oligarch. "Everyone was feverishly looking for tickets, even to St. Petersburg," he said, as leaving Russia is not easy due to sanctions and available flight tickets quickly ran out.

Three days later, State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin would de facto confirm that frightened officials were leaving the country.

Two federal officials recounted that Finance Minister Anton Siluanov, apparently fearing accusations of disloyalty towards his subordinates, demanded on Saturday that employees return from vacations and business trips and be ready to go to work on Monday.

The investigative outlet Vazhniye Istorii reported, citing flight-tracking data, that the private jets of oligarchs Arkady Rotenberg and Vladimir Potanin, as well as that of Industry Minister Denis Manturov, left Russia on June 24. And the plane of the son of Yuri Kovalchuk, a close friend of Putin's, flew from Moscow to St. Petersburg. An acquaintance of Manturov's confirmed that the minister was flying to Turkey, saying he had "been planning this weekend for a long time."

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While some were leaving the country or departing from Moscow, others were arming themselves. It's not clear if this was due to heightened patriotism or concerns that the security forces would be unable to resist the rebels. The management of one state-owned company issued weapons to some of its employees.

"Our office is a secure facility in the center of Moscow. After Putin's address, we were called in for a meeting and those of us with combat experience or who served in the military were asked to patrol the street and alley where the office is located. Those who agreed were given weapons. The security services organized everything, but they weren't the only ones who went on patrol," said a top manager of the state-owned company. According to the manager, the boss told employees: "We will eliminate the terrorists until the last bullet."

However, it would be an exaggeration to claim that existential horror reigned in all of Russia's federal agencies and state-owned companies.

Prigozhin's uprising took place on Saturday. Many officials and government managers had left the city the day before, and there was no immediate demand for them to return to work. For example, one employee of the presidential administration was landscaping a garden at their dacha during the rebellion, while his colleague from the government apparatus was taking a stroll with their children.

Among civilian officials, employees of the political bloc of the Kremlin had to work on Saturday. Around 10 a.m., after Putin's address, governors, deputies, and senators started receiving calls from Staraya Ploshchad [the presidential administration's location] demanding that they publicly declare their support for Putin. It was important for the Kremlin to create the illusion that society as a whole had rallied around the president. After the uprising, both Putin himself and Russian propaganda would repeat the assertion that the people were with the authorities, not with the rebels.

"We recorded a video expressing support for the president before they even called us — first and foremost, we wanted to reassure people," recalls our acquaintance in the leadership of

one of the Russian regions. No other instructions came from the Kremlin — the regional authorities themselves agreed to stay in touch with their envoy. At the governor's initiative, officials found out how many people in their ranks were serving or had served under Prigozhin. It turned out to be just a few, and there was no need to fear any unrest in the region, according to the interviewee.

Another interviewee close to the leadership of a region near Moscow recalled that the military and the National Guard did nothing until they were asked by civilian officials: "They only took warehouses with weapons and prisons under enhanced protection when the civilian authorities presented them with this bright idea. In other words, there was no plan at all, although there were people in the units — not everyone went to war."

After the uprising: "Shoigu should shoot himself."

On Saturday evening, Prigozhin said his fighters would turn back and go to their field camps, claiming they had reached within 200 kilometers of Moscow. Through the mediation of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, he managed to have the criminal mutiny case against him dropped. Prigozhin and his fighters will relocate to Belarus under the deal.

While Monday was declared a day off for Muscovites, all Russian officials and managers went back to work. This included members of the government, who said on camera that the economy and the social sphere had survived the uprising and that everything was under control. However, the exhaustion on the faces of the prime minister and his deputies clearly reflected the stress they had endured.

What happened? Regarding the uprising itself, our interviewees agreed that Prigozhin "went mad."

"Sooner or later, Novichok [a nerve agent used to poison Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny] should come to him," said a person well-acquainted with Putin.

But perhaps even more than they were toward Prigozhin's rebellion, the Russian civilian elite was frustrated by the behavior of Putin, his security forces, and the military.

"I felt very ashamed that something like this had become possible in our country," said a high-ranking source in the executive branch, adding that he feels worse than he did after the start of the war. "Yes, this is treason, but how is it possible that they ended up in a peaceful city [Rostov-on-Don] without any resistance? This person who fled from Rostov [Shoigu], if he messed everything up to such an extent, he should simply shoot himself if he has any honor," he said.

"These Prigozhin people should have been eliminated on the way from Rostov, struck with a salvo of fire so that no one would dare — that is the duty of the state. Instead, they let them off the hook and allowed them to go to Belarus! And the worst part is, no one was there, everyone was gone: Putin, Shoigu, everyone," angrily mused another interviewee close to the government.

"A banana republic," "a circus," "we've been screwed all over" — these are the expressions used to describe the feelings of our interviewees regarding the reaction of the country's

military and political leadership to the uprising. Members of the Russian elite, who had already adapted to a new reality during the nearly one-and-a-half years of war with Ukraine, were once again profoundly shaken.

"Everyone in the elite unanimously believed that Putin had lost control over Prigozhin and the entire situation. They will remember this well," said Alexandra Prokopenko, an expert at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center who studies the Russian elite.

P.S. Four days after Prigozhin's uprising, Putin went to Dagestan to discuss tourism. When asked how officials are feeling and behaving now, a government interviewee replied: "As always — as if nothing happened :)."

You can read more by Farida Rustamova and Maxim Tovkaylo on their Substack*.*

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