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Kremlin Dismisses Prigozhin Assassination Rumors as 'Absolute Lies'

August 25, 2023



Dmitry Peskov. **Sergey Bobylev / POOL**

The Kremlin on Friday dismissed claims that President Vladimir Putin was involved in the presumed death of Wagner mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in a plane crash this week.

The circumstances surrounding Wednesday evening's crash, which occurred exactly two months after Wagner's failed mutiny against Russia's military establishment, stirred speculation of a possible assassination.

Putin had said as the June 23-24 coup unfolded that its plotters would "inevitably be punished." A deal was later struck with Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko to relocate to Wagner to Belarus following the mutiny.

"There is a lot of speculation around the plane crash and the tragic death of the passengers, including Yevgeny Prigozhin... All this is an absolute lie," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters during a briefing.

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Asked whether the Kremlin had confirmation of Prigozhin's death, Peskov referred to Putin's message of condolences Thursday where he said an investigation "will take some time" and "will be conducted in full and brought to a conclusion."

"As soon as any official conclusions are ready for publication, they will be published," Peskov said.

He declined to confirm or deny whether Putin planned to attend Prigozhin's funeral, citing the president's "tight schedule." Questions surrounded the funeral's format following claims that Prigozhin was a recipient of the Hero of Russia title, which grants hero's burial rites.

Peskov also declined to comment on Wagner's future without its high-profile leader and distanced the Kremlin from the private military company despite Putin's own admission that the Russian state had funded the private military company.

"Let's not forget that there's no such structure as PMC Wagner. There's the Wagner Group," he said.

In comments made just days after Wagner's botched mutiny, Putin said that Prigozhin's main company Concord had earned 80 billion rubles ($888.1 million) from catering contracts with the Defense Ministry over the past year.

Peskov previously confirmed that Putin had met with Prigozhin and 34 Wagner commanders at the Kremlin on June 29 where he had reportedly offered them "employment and combat options."

On Friday, he denied that Putin and Prigozhin had met afterward.

AFP contributed reporting.

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