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6 People (Other Than Putin) Who Defined Russia in 2023

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Collage MT

From mercenary leaders to pro-Kremlin pop stars — and from opposition activists to conservative internet crusaders — these were the biggest names in the headlines in 2023:

Known as "Putin's chef," Yevgeny Prigozhin became a prominent restaurateur and government caterer in the 1990s after leaving prison. Today he is best known as the founder of the Wagner Group, a brutal mercenary organization that conducted operations across Africa and the Middle East and played a leading role in the invasion of Ukraine.

Prigozhin was reportedly awarded the title Hero of Russia, the country's highest honor, by Putin himself.

At the start of the war, 400 Wagner fighters were reported to have been flown from Central Africa to Kyiv to assassinate President Volodymyr Zelensky.

As Wagner's force in Ukraine grew to an estimated 50,000 men — 40,000 of whom were believed to have been recruited from prison — Prigozhin became increasingly critical of Russia's Defense Ministry.

He accused the ministry of "high treason" and threatened to pull out of the effort to capture the frontline city of Bakhmut, calling the military leadership "bastards."

In June 2023, Prigozhin accused the Defense Ministry of deceiving the public and ordered his men to march on Moscow. Wagner fighters swiftly seized Rostov-on-Don and advanced within 200 kilometers of the capital before Prigozhin called off the mutiny.

Two months later, he was killed in a plane crash widely believed to have been ordered by the Kremlin.

Throughout the war, Prigozhin gained supporters in Russia, leading the Kremlin to keep his funeral secret to avoid "mass gatherings" of sympathizers elevating him to hero status.

While some of his most ardent supporters refuse to believe Prigozhin has died, analysts see his death as a reminder to Russian elites that they can only survive by remaining loyal to Putin.

Putin's children's rights commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova says she has overseen the transfer of over 700,000 Ukrainian children to Russia since the full-scale invasion began.

This March, the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for her and Putin's arrest, accusing them of the war crime of unlawful deportation of children.

Lvova-Belova said an "overwhelming majority" of underage arrivals came without parents or relatives. She said she has adopted a 15-year-old from Russian-occupied Mariupol "thanks" to Putin.

ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan said Russia was treating children as "spoils of war."

In response to the ICC warrant, Lvova-Belova said "First of all, it's great that the international community appreciated the work to help children in our country, that we don't leave them in the war zone."

Many musicians left Russia after the start of the war. But Yaroslav Dronov, known as Shaman, used the invasion as an opportunity to become one of the country's most visible pop stars.

Relatively unknown at the start of 2022, he released "Vstanem" ("Let's Rise"), which was dedicated to Russian soldiers who died in World War II, the day before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was launched.

The song quickly gained traction and Shaman has become one of the most recognizable faces in Russia's pro-war propaganda machine.

Dronov is frequently invited to perform at state concerts, including in annexed Crimea. This January, he played for Russian soldiers in the occupied Ukrainian cities of Luhansk, Mariupol and Henichesk.

In July, he released the video for his single "Moy Boy" ("My Fight"), which was filmed during a tour of occupied Ukraine. The video — which included footage of destroyed buildings and military equipment — was watched over 1 million times in its first 24 hours.

Having relocated to Israel at the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, opposition politician and activist Maxim Katz is trying to unite Russia's fractured opposition into a coalition to remove Putin from power.

While Mikhail Khodorkovsky has agreed to discussions, proposals from Katz, a now-estranged associate of Alexei Navalny, were rejected by the imprisoned opposition leader and his allies.

Katz, who was labeled a "foreign agent" in 2022, was sentenced to eight years in prison in absentia this August on charges of spreading "fake news" about the Armed Forces.

The prosecution claimed he had, in a video viewed over 2 million times, falsely accused Russian forces of executing Ukrainian civilians in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha, where 458 people were found dead.

Katz was also banned from running websites for four years. This has not stopped him from updating his popular YouTube channel, where he discusses and criticizes Russian military actions in Ukraine to his more than 1.9 million subscribers.

"Ultimately, the goal is to firmly embed the concept of a liberal, democratic Russia within the fabric of our society," he told the Moscow Times earlier this year.

Yekaterina Mizulina, head of the Kremlin-aligned Safe Internet League, has built a public profile as a woman with the power to make and break artists' careers — and even upend their lives.

Mizulina has denounced at least 166 people and four musical groups throughout her career. Subjects of her accusations have retracted their work, had their concerts canceled and even faced criminal charges.

Others have visited her office to apologize for their conduct, highlighting the level of power she has built despite not running a state organization.

Her denunciations have prompted law enforcement to investigate two comedians who joked about the death of a pro-war blogger. She called for "Russophobic" TikToker Danya Milokhin to be conscripted, causing him to flee the country.

Several days after she reported TikToker Xolidayboy to the police for pro-Ukraine statements he was summoned for military service and subsequently collapsed on stage.

Mizulina's reach stretches beyond the music industry. This year, teenagers at shopping malls across Russia were arrested en masse after she accused the Ukrainian government of creating a teen subculture aimed at destabilizing Russia.

Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's third son, Adam, made headlines this autumn after he beat up a teenager accused of burning a copy of the Quran.

Instead of facing charges, the 16-year-old's profile has grown. He has received at least nine awards from state institutions and public organizations, including the title of "Hero of Chechnya" and the order "For Merit to the Karachay-Cherkessia Republic."

Adam was also appointed head of the department responsible for ensuring his father's safety, and given an honorary post as Observer of a rifle battalion.

All of this has come in a year full of rumors about Ramzan's ill health and even death, leading to speculation that the 47-year-old leader is setting up "swaggering and sadistic" Adam to succeed him instead of his older, "shy and tongue-tied" son Akhmat.

After news of the assault spread, Adam Delimkhanov, a close ally of Ramzan Kadyrov said Adam had the support of State Duma deputies and senators from Chechnya."

"Considering the heinous crime of this subhuman Zhuravel [who allegedly burned the Quran], Adam acted very humanely by letting him live."

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