

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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