The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

One Year After Wagner Uprising, Putin More Powerful Than Ever

By Caleb Davis for AFP

June 23, 2024



Gavriil Grigorov/Russian Presidential Press and Information Office/TASS

When Russian paramilitary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin sent his Wagner mercenaries charging towards Moscow last year in a short-lived rebellion, President Vladimir Putin looked weak and vulnerable.

But just one year on from the most serious challenge to his authority in almost a quarter of a century in power, the Kremlin leader now appears more secure than ever.

Prigozhin was killed in an airplane crash two months after the mutiny, in which his Wagner fighters seized Russia's army headquarters in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don, shot down military aircraft and marched halfway to the capital before Belarus mediated a deal to end the 24-hour uprising.

And in the aftermath a bruised Putin implemented a new rule: no one would ever be allowed

the same level of autonomy again.

"Until Prigozhin's rise, we did not have any cases when the commander of a strong military unit was able to have financial, political and media resources at the same time," Nikolai Petrov, a fellow at the Chatham House international affairs think tank, said, describing the unique position the mercenary boss had acquired ahead of his rebellion.

Putin allowed Prigozhin to have all of those levers, not only because of their close personal relationship but because Russia's ground offensive in Ukraine was losing momentum and he needed Wagner's manpower.

It was a costly error, and one that has made Putin since then prioritize control and loyalty when allocating resources, Petrov said.

Not only is "nobody now unloyal to Putin," but the 71-year-old has sought "direct and constant control over most important players," he said.

Related article: In Photos: Wagner Memorials Appear on Mutiny's First Anniversary

The president has ordered sweeping changes to the country's military establishment in recent weeks — ironically, one of Prigozhin's pre-mutiny demands.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was removed and several senior military figures have been arrested on corruption charges.

Putin installed technocratic economist Andrei Belousov as his new defense chief, rather than a military strongman — again avoiding "any influential leader" who could promote the army's interests at the very top, according to Petrov.

The reshuffle marked a turnaround from a year ago, when Putin backed his defense chiefs in the face of Prigozhin's accusations of rampant corruption, strategic ineptitude and of having botched the Ukraine invasion.

The key difference was Putin had ordered the shake-up out of necessity, not political pressure.

"The fact that he's able to take these steps and challenge the interests and livelihood of senior military figures is a mark of his strength, rather than his weakness," said Nigel Gould-Davies, senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

'Dominance'

Putin also demonstrated his power with an 87% landslide victory in the March presidential elections, devoid of any real opposition and panned by international observers.

The vote showed Putin could "concoct anything he wants and force the population to accept it," Gould-Davies said.

"It's an expression of his dominance and power that he can get away with this, rather than the

official, published outcome in any way reflecting real support."

Putin's huge claimed majority was also deliberate, Petrov said.

The result was "symbolic": the exaggerated margin of victory was not because Putin "likes to get as many votes as possible," but rather he had to show that his popularity was "much higher than before the war," Petrov told AFP.

Putin's only real political rival, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic prison colony in February while serving a 19-year sentence, further cementing his power.

"Taken together with other repressive measures and exemplary prison sentences that have been imposed on other people, he has intimidated and cowed and frightened a large portion of the population now," Gould-Davies said.

This does not mean support for the Kremlin runs deep, he cautioned.

During the June 23-24, 2023, uprising, former President Dmitry Medvedev warned against Russia's nuclear arsenal falling into the hands of "bandits" and other regional officials issued tepid statements urging calm.

But there was no widespread defiance or public outpouring of support for Putin.

Pictures from the southern city of Rostov-on-Don showed residents smiling, cheering and taking selfies with Prigozhin and his Wagner men amid the rebellion.

Both the popular and elite response to the uprising showed there was little authentic enthusiasm for Putin or the war, Gould-Davies said.

"Most people just want to keep their head down, and for the war and regime not to touch them."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/06/23/one-year-after-wagner-uprising-putin-more-powerful-than-ever-a85492