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## **Prigozhin's mad race to Moscow a pivotal event and it's shaken Russia to its core**

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# Prigozhin's mad race to Moscow a pivotal event and it's shaken Russia to its core

**The failed rebellion portends that Putin will lose his grip on power, that Russia could become even more of a pariah rogue state, and that its military could redeploy forces from the southern front in the Ukraine conflict around Moscow, well distant from a potential second front based in Belarus.**



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin. Caught in a prisoner's dilemma—with no satisfactory choices—Prigozhin is a former convict who led a private army including thousands of prisoners who remain desperate with little to lose, writes Erika Simpson. *Photographs courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/illustration by Neena Singhal*

## **OPINION**

**BY ERIKA SIMPSON**

June 29, 2023

**LONDON, ONT.—Mercenary fighters moved within Moscow's perimeter on June 24 before turning back to field camps. Their calculated retreat was**

directed by the head of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who then accepted refuge in Belarus, where he could shape negotiations with a strong hand because he commanded an army of more than 25,000 desperate men, confronted with the choice of either signing up for military duty under Russian rule, returning to jail, or being charged with treason.

Caught in a prisoner's dilemma—with no satisfactory choices—Prigozhin is a former convict who led a private army including thousands of prisoners who remain desperate with little to lose. Experienced fighters, they took on the 16-month Ukraine war, and saw first-hand the lack of Russian support, the incompetence of Russian generals, and how Russia withheld ammunition.

Prigozhin accused Russia's military of hitting civilian targets from the air to slow the advance of the Wagner Group's "march for justice." Russian President Vladimir Putin held talks by phone with Belarus leader Alexander Lukashenko, Uzbekistan leader Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, according to the Kremlin press secretary.

NATO ally and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke by telephone with Putin, and urged him to act with common sense. Putin called the Wagner Group's action "treason" in an emergency televised address, and said anybody who took up arms against the Russian military would be punished.

Whether the Wagner Group's para-military forces could continue to work alongside the Russian military was doubtful because security forces were prepared to defend Moscow against them, citizens were advised not to travel around the capital city, and to refrain from returning to work on June 26.

Internationally, worries were that Ukraine might attempt a stronger counteroffensive, and the West might help them even more, leading to rebel forces taking control, somehow, of Russian nuclear forces or the president making a grave strategic error. U.S. President Joe Biden retreated to Camp David for consultations after telephone calls with allies.

Ukrainian supporters rejoiced at their sudden psychological advantage, as Russians seemed to realize they could no longer accept Wagnerian forces as trustworthy. The Wagner Group had conquered Bakhmut for Russia—a short-term victory that will still entail Russian troops defending the decimated city for years into a dismal future.

In the midst of chaos and fighting, Russia's foreign ministry warned Western countries against any attempt to use the internal situation to achieve so-called Russophobic aims: "such attempts are futile and evoke no support either in Russia or among soberly-minded political forces abroad." Was Putin's inner circle still in charge, after 23 years of corrupt power-sharing? Prigozhin's race toward Moscow was inexplicably mad and crazy; however, it demonstrated how mercenary troops could invade the Motherland unchallenged and possibly enter the capital.

Any armed mutiny must be crushed, but that outcome will be daunting because Russia has used up men and ammunition fighting Ukraine. Russian parents must worry whether their sons will be used as cannon fodder on multiple warfronts now that Putin is openly battling his former crony's battle-hardened forces, as well as Ukraine's stalwart sons.

Reports were that one convoy almost reached Moscow having already captured the million-strong city of Rostov—the 10th largest city in Russia—and the headquarters of the Southern Military District, as well as the supply centre for Russia's attack on Ukraine. The fact it moved so far northwards with little resistance means Prigozhin's plan had already garnered serious support among members of the Russian regular army, or they had moved the greater part of 1,100 kms (680 miles) toward heavily-fortified Moscow, but turned back to avoid bloodshed.

Moscow would not have fallen quickly—like Kabul did in Afghanistan—because, assuredly, the members of the Russian National Guard would not take off their military uniforms and hide in their basements? It may be the mutiny was not planned from the beginning as a coup. Still, it must be seen as a pivotal event—like the attack on Washington's capitol on Jan. 6, 2021,—that shakes Russians to their core.

If Ukraine launches an attack on Crimea now it might mean Putin could cite an ‘existential threat’ and resort to using tactical nuclear weapons. Some rabid Russian generals and academics talk about climbing the ladder of nuclear escalation and threatening their use. And the decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus lends credence to fears that Russians could use nuclear weapons either on purpose or accidentally due to misperception and miscommunication.

Putin’s televised addresses from the Kremlin emphasized Russia’s existence was under threat, and that Russians would continue to fight for their state with its thousand-year history. In an audio message, Prigozhin replied that—as patriots of our motherland who fought and are fighting for it—“We don’t want the country to continue to live in corruption, deceit and bureaucracy.”

The corruption narrative can be entrancing, and it is unlikely the Wagner Group would have made such a rapid move toward Moscow without hidden support from key generals who similarly question the elite’s corruption and Putin’s strong-hold grasp. That the Wagner Group took over Rostov without bloodshed—the main logistical hub for Russia’s entire invasion force against Ukraine—and Wagner fighters were able to take up positions in armoured vehicles and battle tanks while citizens calmly filmed the take-over—means that although Red Square in Moscow was blocked off by metal barriers, the collective Russian mind-set could also be blocked by growing doubts and paranoia about attacking Ukraine.

Russians must be reflecting on the long distance from southern Rostov northwards to Moscow, and the fact the mercenaries passed through another city, Voronezh, halfway en route. Did Russian helicopters fire upon the country’s roads, risking civilians? How were three Russian helicopters reportedly downed?

The failed rebellion portends that Putin will lose his grip on power, that Russia could become even more of a pariah rogue state, and that its military could redeploy forces from the southern front—where they are currently fighting against southern and eastern Ukraine—around Russia’s capital, well distant from a potential second front based in Belarus.

*Erika Simpson is a professor of international politics at Western University, the president of the Canadian Peace Research Association and the author of [Addressing Challenges Facing NATO and the United States Using Lessons Learned from Afghanistan and Ukraine](#) and [Addressing Challenges Facing NATO Using Lessons Learned from Canada](#).*

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