

Russia: After the mutiny

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Wagner soldiers in the city of Rostov-on-Don, Russia, June 24, 2023.

June 27 — The armed mutiny carried out by a part of the private army of Evgeny Prigozhin, which for practically a full day allowed Ukrainian and Western experts and propagandists to present an image of Russia facing a coup, civil war, and the state in the process of implosion, continues to focus political debate in Moscow, Kiev and even in Western capitals.

The events have also caused all kinds of speculations that have been fueled by the few details that are available so far, especially how the negotiation process that finally put an end to the rebellion took place and, above all, the actual terms of the agreement between the owner of Wagner and the Russian and Belarusian states.

Throughout the last three days, all kinds of theories or desires have been heard that, from the Western side, have wanted to see in the Prigozhin rebellion the beginning of the end of President Vladimir Putin's mandate or the collapse of the Russian war effort in Ukraine and, on the other, an operation planned by the Russian authorities, either to justify the dismissal of Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and/or Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov or, even more improbable, to send Wagner's army to Belarus without causing suspicion, perhaps even for an attack on Kiev.

It goes without saying that the dismissal of the defense minister or the chief of the general staff - both severely questioned for months due to the operational, logistical, and intelligence deficiencies that have weighed down Russian troops in the war - as the result of a mutiny organized by a private military company would have been a sign of weakness for Russia that it cannot afford. Last weekend showed the danger of privatizing the monopoly of violence and its delegation to private groups with their own economic and political interests and the risk implied by the dependence on external structures to compensate for the reduction in the number of troops in the professional army that has resulted from the reforms of the last three decades.

This weakness manifested in the insistence of the Russian authorities, from the first moment of the rebellion, to guarantee soldiers' immunity precisely to ensure that they could count on these troops at the front when Moscow could not afford to lose a large number of troops. The dismissal of Shoigu or Gerasimov, whose errors during the planning of the Special Military Operation and the development of the war could well justify their dismissals, would have further undermined the already battered image of the Russian state after an armed mutiny with a military convoy advancing

on the capital.

Hence, there was no mention of Shoigu or Gerasimov in the announcement of the de-escalation agreement, whose visible face was Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, but in which other people participated, it has been learned, including the Tula Governor Alexey Diumin, whose name is one of the favorites to replace the minister of defense.

Lacked political support

In the hours after the agreement that put an end to an armed mutiny that has revealed the contradictions of a Russian state little prepared to deal with the political consequences of the war, a person with clear economic and political aspirations, Evgeny Prigozhin, has sought to bring the discourse into his territory. It is there, in the media field, where Prigozhin has managed to gain a presence and prominence, that he has subsequently tried to translate into control and levers of power.

In his first communication after the end of the armed episode, the owner of Wagner insisted on the main points he had maintained last Saturday and fell back into the same contradictions.

The speech by Vladimir Putin, who did not even want to mention Prigozhin's name, in which he called the events that were unfolding treason, eliminated any possibility that the owner of Wagner could obtain relevant political support. Winning Putin's support may have been the goal of Prigozhin, who has been seen in the past as close to the Russian president.

However, this mutiny caused a rapid alignment of all the relevant political forces on the part of the state and its commander-in-chief. Without political support and amidst the disbelief and even apathy of the population, only explicit support from a

part of the regular army could allow Wagner to achieve its objectives.

Prigozhin insisted yesterday that his actions did not constitute a coup, nor was his objective the overthrow of the political regime. It is not difficult to see that the movement was not seeking to do away with Vladimir Putin, to whom Wagner's owner had repeatedly sworn allegiance, but rather against the defense ministry and general staff. Putin's speech and the complete absence of any show of solidarity with Wagner from the regular army or even the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics leaves no room for Prigozhin to now insist on that failed goal.

Hence, Wagner returns to the idea of a "march for justice" and insists on using arguments of doubtful credibility. In his communication yesterday, Prigozhin claimed to have given "a master class on what Feb. 24 [2022] should have been like," a questionable argument considering that his troops fell into similar mistakes.

Hoping for social and political support and backing from part of the Ukrainian army that never came, the Russian troops advanced towards Kiev without the necessary air cover and were exposed to the enemy. The apparently rapid initial advance, even with practically no resistance, did not bear fruit, and without achieving their objectives, the Russian troops had to turn around and return to their bases, just as Wagner's troops did some 200 kilometers away from the Russian capital - at least in Prigozhin's version.

As Shoigu did at that time, Prigozhin also tries to claim to have fulfilled his objectives, something obviously false as long as there are no changes in the defense ministry and general staff.

What happened on Saturday, the movement of a significant amount of troops and equipment, apparently orchestrated by Dmitry Utkin, a figure even more obscure and politically even more to the right than Prigozhin, requires planning that directly conflicts with the motive alleged by the owner of Wagner to begin the rebellion.

To justify the mutiny, Prigozhin alleges a bombing [by the Russian army against Wagner] that, he says, took place on Friday and cost 30 lives, a fallacious argument considering that Western intelligence agencies had detected the preparation of the mutiny several days before. Why Russian intelligence did not detect it is another question that remains in the air.

Wagner's owner, who also alleges massive support from the population that simply did not exist, insists on blaming the Russian Air Force for the blood spilled. Prigozhin claims that his troops shot down several Russian VKS helicopters due to their shelling. Wagner's owner lies: A large part of the destroyed planes were attacked on the ground, something that has caused enormous anger in Russian aviation, which wonders who will have to pay for the destroyed planes.

Bargaining power

The fog of war of this grotesque spectacle has not yet dissipated, and many speculations persist. One of them, the fate of Wagner's foreign missions, was revealed yesterday. Although the Russian legislature has stalled the study of the law that was intended to regulate the operation of private security companies until further notice, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov affirmed yesterday that the services that Wagner's mercenaries provided in countries such as Mali or the Central African Republic will continue.

In these cases, security services provided by soldiers of Russian origin are both a support to those states in their attempt to stabilize complex situations - in which Wagner has been accused, in many cases with evidence, of serious crimes - and as a form of Russian presence on the continent. Both aspects make Wagner's soldiers necessary to the Russian state, especially as it tries to win allies far from the West. However, it must also be remembered that Wagner's operations in Africa are limited, as shown by the number of troops stationed there: about 400 in Mali or 1,400 in the Central African Republic.

The importance of the company in these missions is an ace up Prigozhin's sleeve that he will now try to use to his benefit as he tries to maintain control, direct or via proxy, over this lucrative foreign business.

In his statement, Prigozhin also claimed to have saved Wagner from being liquidated, not only by imaginary bombing but also administratively. However, as expected based on the words and actions of the Russian representatives, Wagner's future as a group in Russia has been put on hold. In a speech late in the evening, his first appearance since his nervous speech on Saturday, Vladimir Putin gave Wagner's soldiers three options: Sign a contract with the defense ministry, return home, or move to Belarus. Everything indicates that Wagner will thus be dispersed among different units of the Russian regular troops or sent abroad.

Prigozhin is aware that the shortage of troops to maintain his war effort in Ukraine and Syria and the presence in Africa make his company necessary, an argument that has given him some bargaining power even despite his mutiny. However, it is also significant that, despite what was stated on Sunday, the case initiated by the Federal Security Service against Prigozhin has not been closed. This open case means the possibility of an immediate arrest and extradition to Russia if the businessman doesn't comply with his part of the agreement.

Translated by Melinda Butterfield

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