



Written by [Steve Bonta](#) on June 24, 2023

Russia: Prigozhin's Mutiny Against Putin

In a dramatic swing of events over the past 24 hours, Russia appears to be on the brink of civil war. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the volatile and flamboyant leader of the Wagner Group, a large private mercenary group founded in 2014 and responsible for the recent Pyrrhic victory at Bakhmut, has mutinied against Putin's government and is now marching toward Moscow with a large contingent of hardened Wagner troops.

The trouble between Prigozhin and Moscow has been simmering for months, with the Wagner leader becoming increasingly bold in his denunciations of what he has called failed military tactics and the deliberate sacrifice of tens of thousands of Russian lives by Putin's government in the Ukrainian meat-grinder. The event that triggered this uprising was a massive surprise attack on Wagner forces. Although details are unclear, it appears that someone — Prigozhin is blaming the Russian military — attacked the Wagner encampment from the rear with a missile barrage that killed a large number of Wagner mercenaries (Prigozhin is putting the number at 2,000 dead).

Following the attack, which Russian media are already blaming on the Ukrainians or a secret Western military op designed to sow discord in the Russian ranks, Prigozhin unleashed a lengthy tirade announcing his intent to march to Moscow and get rid of the current leadership. He singled out Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Army chief of staff Valery Gerasimov for particular obloquy, claiming that they "should be held responsible for the genocide of the Russian people, the murder of tens of thousands of Russian citizens and the transfer of Russian territories to the enemy." Regarding the defense minister, he added, "in the first days of the war, Shoigu killed thousands of Russian soldiers. He destroyed the most combat-ready part of the army, and combat-ready was very little part of the army, because in the army for many years were raised the fools and any active man, he either left the army or was ready to leave."

Prigozhin's first military objective was Rostov-on-Don, the largest city in southern Russia and the headquarters for the Russian military command responsible for launching bombing raids into Ukraine. Wagner forces appear to have taken control of all Russian military assets in Rostov, and have instructed Russian military leadership there to continue fighting in Ukraine — but not to attack Wagner forces or try to interfere with their northward march. Prigozhin's forces now appear to be headed north along the M-4 towards Russia, and are approaching Voronezh, the largest city between Rostov and Moscow.



Wagner leader Prigozhin (screen-grab from video; Prigozhin Press Service via AP)



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Along the way, Russian planes and helicopters have already been brought down by Wagner forces, while the Russian military has been attacking the mutineers relentlessly and has even destroyed a large fuel depot at Voronezh to prevent it from falling into Wagner hands.

Putin, for his part, has been unambiguous in his response, stating in an address to the nation that “Russia today is leading the most difficult war for its future, repelling the aggression of neo-nazis and their handlers. Against us, the whole military, economical and information machines of the West are turned... [M]utiny is a deadly threat to our state, to us as a nation. It’s a strike against our nation, our people. And our actions to defend the fatherland from such a threat will be brutal. Anyone who consciously went on the path of betrayal, who prepared the armed mutiny, went on the path of blackmail and terrorist actions, will take an inevitable punishment.”

Prigozhin is by no means an advocate of peace with Ukraine and the West. He is encouraging the military to continue prosecuting the war, and is vowing to return to finish off Ukraine once he has dealt with the Putin government. At the moment, it looks like a monumental power struggle between two Russian strongmen, and the outcome — as in imperial Rome — will depend on which side the military chooses.



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