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Autocracy and loyalty



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the **evolution and downfall of Yevgeny Prigozhin's relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin**, with particular focus on the Wagner Group and its critical role in Russian foreign and military policy. What began as a **personal alliance based on business trust and loyalty** gradually transformed into a strategic partnership through which Russia could **pursue global ambitions using unofficial force**. The Wagner Group, founded by Prigozhin, operated as a deniable yet effective military tool for the Kremlin across Ukraine, Syria, and Africa. However, the **relationship began to fracture as Wagner's autonomy, success, and growing domestic popularity clashed with the Kremlin's need for centralized control**. This culminated in Wagner's armed uprising in June 2023—a **shocking rebellion** that exposed deep rifts in Russia's security apparatus. Although the mutiny was short-lived and ended through a negotiated settlement, it irreparably **damaged the bond between Prigozhin and Putin**. Prigozhin's sudden and suspicious death two months later finalized Wagner's absorption into state structures and signalled a broader consolidation of military power under Putin's direct control.

2. HOW PUTIN AND PRIGOZHIN MET

Yevgeny Prigozhin was born in 1961 in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg). After serving a **prison sentence** in the Soviet era, he began a modest business career in the 1990s by opening a hotdog stand. His **catering business** gradually expanded into a major enterprise that won contracts to supply food for schools and government events. Prigozhin's proximity to the rising political elite, **especially then-deputy mayor Vladimir Putin**, proved to be pivotal.

Putin and Prigozhin's relationship evolved from **local networking to personal trust**. By the early 2000s, Prigozhin's Concord Catering was serving official Kremlin banquets. This trust-based relationship allowed Prigozhin to transition from mere entrepreneur to unofficial operator of sensitive government missions. Although not a military man, his **loyalty, discretion, and purposeful** approach made him a valuable asset. Putin, who values **loyalty more than anything else**, saw in Prigozhin someone willing to do the regime's dirty work—without questioning the rationale.

3. WAGNER: CREATION AND USE BY PUTIN

The Wagner Group was officially born around 2014, though its foundations were built earlier. The group was initially formed to **support pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region**. As private military companies are technically illegal in Russia, Wagner operated under a veil of deniability, with informal **ties to the Russian military and GRU (military intelligence)**. Its early operations in Ukraine proved successful, offering a cheap, flexible, and deniable alternative to traditional forces.

Under Prigozhin's management, Wagner expanded its activities to Syria, where it protected strategic Russian interests such as oil fields while supporting the Assad regime. Wagner mercenaries were also deployed across Africa—in countries like Libya, the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan—offering a **blend of military services, security for authoritarian regimes, and extraction of natural resources like gold and oil**. These operations provided Russia with geopolitical leverage and economic gains while minimizing diplomatic exposure.

Wagner's increasing visibility and Prigozhin's growing assertiveness created **tensions within Russia's official defence establishment**. Prigozhin often clashed with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, whom he publicly accused of incompetence and corruption. Despite this friction, **Putin tolerated Wagner's semi-independent role for years**, valuing its effectiveness abroad and its usefulness in projecting power.

4. CONFLICT AND RIFT BETWEEN PUTIN AND WAGNER

By mid-2023, tensions between Wagner and the Russian military leadership reached a boiling point. In early June, the Ministry of Defence ordered all private military contractors to sign official contracts by July 1, 2023, effectively bringing them under state control. **Prigozhin refused**, interpreting this as a hostile takeover aimed at sidelining him.

On June 23, 2023, following alleged missile strikes on Wagner camps by Russian forces, **Prigozhin launched what he termed a "march for justice."** Around 25,000 Wagner fighters took **control of Rostov-on-Don**, a major southern city and Russian

military hub, and began advancing toward Moscow. The rebellion was swift and alarming; Wagner forces shot down several Russian aircraft and met little resistance during their push north.

Relocating 25,000 fighters from the Donbass region to Rostov, implied the **involvement of a huge quantity of people**. Members of the FSB, GRU and military personnel were involved or knew the move that was going to take place.

President Putin, caught off guard, waited more than 12 hours before addressing the nation, denouncing the rebellion as treason and promising retribution. However, the federal response was confused and inconsistent, **revealing cracks in the Kremlin's control**. Wagner column moved with no opposition all the way up to the Oka River, less than 100 km. off the capital.

The uprising was called off after Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko brokered a deal. Prigozhin agreed to withdraw in exchange for security guarantees and safe passage to Belarus. **The mutiny had lasted less than 24 hours but left a deep imprint on the Russian state**.

In the aftermath, Putin revealed publicly for the first time that **Wagner had been state-funded** to the tune of billions of Rubles. He offered Wagner fighters the opportunity to sign individual contracts with the Ministry of Defence. Prigozhin, however, rejected this deal, insisting that Wagner's independence was essential to its success.

Less than two months later, on August 23, 2023, **Prigozhin died in a plane crash under suspicious circumstances**. Most analysts interpreted the incident as a state-ordered execution, meant to eliminate a political liability and to send a clear message: disloyalty would not be tolerated. In the following weeks, Wagner's operations were restructured under direct state control. New formations, such as the "Africa Corps," emerged as successors, **this time fully integrated into the Russian Defence Ministry**.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Yevgeny Prigozhin's journey from convicted felon to Kremlin insider and finally to renegade warlord illustrates **the volatility at the heart of Putin's regime**. Prigozhin's rise was enabled by personal loyalty and the utility of extra-legal force in achieving Russian strategic goals. Wagner served the Kremlin well in extending Russian influence under

plausible deniability, but **the group's growing power eventually threatened the very state that birthed it.**

The June 2023 uprising was a **watershed moment in modern Russian history.** It revealed not only the **fragility of Putin's security architecture** but also the dangerous tensions bred by competing centres of power within an autocratic system. Although the rebellion was quickly suppressed, the fact that it occurred at all—and achieved temporary success—was a **major blow to the perception of Putin's invincibility.**

The Kremlin's subsequent actions—neutralizing Prigozhin and absorbing Wagner—demonstrate a renewed focus on centralizing military control and eliminating potential threats. The episode serves as a stark reminder that in Putin's Russia, power is tolerated only when it flows from and returns to the top. Any deviation, no matter how useful or successful in the past, will eventually be punished if it dares to act independently.

Wagner's story is not merely a tale of mercenaries—it is a case study in the **dynamics of loyalty, power, and repression within a modern authoritarian regime.**

Putin had already behaved this way in other domains. First, when he had to **tame the vor v zakov** (thieves in the law, traditional Russian mafia) who wanted to interfere in politics in early 2000s. And second, when he had to **show the political opponents his firm dissent.** Threats and assassinations are the language Putin understands and speaks when it is about his survival and imposing his views, requests, and needs in every form.

6. LESSONS FOR UKRAINE

Putin is going to fight for what he wants because he is a relentless fighter, he knows as a judoka that resilience in combat makes a difference and takes you to victory. Being able to keep your position though it hurts, will lead the opponent to the tatami and then submission.

The meeting in Alaska between Trump and Putin has been **shorter than expected** and has left Trump with a sense of loss. However, Putin seemed elated after the meeting and left Alaska with an unusual smile and a **strangely relaxed mood.**

This can only be **bad for Ukraine and Europe by extension**. For unknown reasons, Trump does not boast or posture when Putin is around, as he usually does. It is Putin who showed an amusing behaviour, almost playful, in Alaska. It was only a three-hour meeting when it was expected to last twice as long.

If Ukraine wants peace, it will have to **cede territory** and it will be more than the soil Russia currently controls. It will include a corridor linking the entire Donbas region with Crimea. It will isolate the rest of Ukraine from access to the Sea of Azov.

Other Russian demands include Ukraine to be excluded from NATO and the European Union. Those are the fundamental reasons that, according to Russia, instigated the war. Putin wants to restore the previous status quo. In fact, he wants to see it improved in his favour: a buffer zone all around Eastern Ukraine and security assurances.

Zelensky is in dire straits. **Local popular support is waning**, and the lasting war is **draining the will to keep up the war effort**.

Ukraine has seen the American support weakened. Ukraine is aware of the fragility of European support. Time is ticking and pressure is mounting for Zelensky.

If war is avoided, Ukraine will lose almost 20% of its territory and it will be part of neither NATO nor the EU in a near future. It is also highly likely that Russia will manage to remove Zelensky from power and will do its best to tamper with the results of coming electoral processes in order to get friendly governments in Kyiv.

If war crawls on, kinetic actions against Zelensky will increase until success is achieved. Tampering with Ukrainian politics will be the new normal in Kyiv.

Putin is determined to get what he wants. Putin would rather get it sooner than later. That's why he has attended the meeting in Alaska. But he is not going to renounce his firm convictions. Only black swans may bring unexpected results: **Putin's sudden incapacitating illness or death, coups d'état** (either in Moscow or Kyiv), **turn of tide in US presidency** (Trump's removal for any unforeseeable reason: sickness, impeachment due to Epstein's case, successful assassination attempt), **devastation in Russia** by natural causes. And **even those unexpected events may not bring the change of luck Ukraine needs**.