



The Fallout From Prigozhin's Putsch

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We still don't understand exactly what happened in Russia, or why. On June 23, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the ruthless head of Wagner, Russia's most notorious mercenary outfit, launched what appeared to be a coup against the Kremlin. Over the span of about a day, Prigozhin and thousands of his soldiers of fortune abandoned their positions in Ukraine, where they had been fighting for Moscow, occupied two separate Russian cities, and subsequently marched on the country's capital — before abruptly turning back and capitulating.

Experts continue to quibble about what actually transpired, with some seeing Prigozhin's actions as an abortive coup intended to bring down the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and others interpreting it as a more tactical mutiny to gain bargaining power in internal politics. But while the motivations of Russia's most notorious mercenary may not be known for some time, the outcome already is. After negotiations facilitated by Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenko, Prigozhin has accepted exile and an apparent amnesty for his men. Moscow's spin-doctors are now working overtime to turn the page on the incident and portray Russia's present regime as both popular and politically stable.

Nevertheless, the long-term consequences of Prigozhin's power play are liable to be profound. Here are a trio of what could be the most consequential for Russian foreign policy — and for Western nations now marshalling a response to its aggression, both in Europe and beyond.

Distrust in the Russian military ranks. In his response to Prigozhin's power play, Putin outlined three options available to Wagner's mercenaries: to lay down their arms and “go home,” to follow their wayward boss into exile in Belarus, or to join the ranks of the regular Russian military. That last choice is particularly problematic, since Prigozhin's march on Moscow appeared to have been motivated in part by a fear that, after months of tense relations with Russia's top military brass, his outfit could be absorbed by the defense ministry and lose its autonomy.

But bringing Wagner into the formal Russian military fold might not prove so easy. The group has distinguished itself in recent months as the most effective fighting force in Ukraine, outstripping the proficiency and capabilities of Russia's regular men under arms. Its members, moreover, appear loyal to their chief, with several thousand taking part in Prigozhin's insurrection. As a result, their devotion to the Russian state is likely to be suspect, and integrating them into the ranks of the Russian armed forces will invariably be a tricky proposition. How that translates onto the battlefield in Ukraine could make all the difference for Kyiv's military counteroffensive, which is now gaining momentum.

A blow to Russian propaganda. While Prigozhin's role as Wagner's capo has dominated international attention in recent months, the man once known as “Putin's chef” also held an equally important position: that of Russia's unofficial disinformation czar. Here, it's useful to remember that the Internet Research Agency (IRA), the notorious troll farm controlled by Prigozhin which previously meddled in U.S. electoral politics, makes up an integral part of the Kremlin extensive information warfare apparatus. And now that its head has fallen from grace, the future of the IRA is murky.

Like Wagner, the IRA is apparently being looked upon with suspicion by Kremlin insiders. Russian news sources are reporting that the IRA, together with the network of fake news sites established in recent years to amplify its false narratives, have been shut down by authorities, perhaps permanently so. The implications for the scope and reach of Russia's global disinformation operations could be significant — and potentially long-lasting.

A global footprint in flux. Wagner's role in the Kremlin's war of choice against Ukraine has, in recent months, overshadowed its engagement in other international theaters. But the private military company has become a truly global force in recent years, and is now shaping outcomes as far afield as Syria and multiple countries on the African continent. Moreover, historically it has done so as an extension of Russian foreign policy, providing Moscow with a modicum of plausible deniability while helping to buttress the Kremlin's autocratic allies.

Now, however, things are potentially very different. Because if Wagner's cadres are no longer trusted by the Kremlin, their autonomy in those places — and therefore their effectiveness — could shrink precipitously. Indeed, there may already be signs that deployed Wagner forces are beginning to get their wings clipped by a distrustful Russian military chain-of-command. If that trend continues, we may see a significant diminution of Russia's role as a power broker in the developing world.

These, moreover, could be just a taste of the changes likely to result from Russia's recent internal tumult. While the particulars of Wagner's recent challenge to the Kremlin might still be shrouded in mystery, it's already clear that Prigozhin's power play — whether an insurrection, a mutiny, or something else — will likely have long-term consequences for the Kremlin.

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