

The failed coup in Russia: Causes and consequences

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A coup attempt led by Evgeny Prigozhin, the chief of the Russian Wagner mercenary force, collapsed in the evening hours of Saturday, local time. In an agreement brokered by Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, Prigozhin has left Russia, and the Russian Secret Service (FSB) has dropped the mutiny investigation initiated earlier in the day against the Wagner leader. There are unconfirmed reports that the deal includes the removal of Defense Minister Shoigu and the chairman of the chief-of-staff, Valery Gerasimov, and the relocation of Wagner to Africa.

Prigozhin started his coup on Friday evening, local time, with a 30-minute video in which he ranted against Russia's military leadership and made a direct appeal to the pro-NATO faction within the Russian ruling class. Prigozhin, who only a few weeks ago called for a mass mobilization and a full turn to a war economy in order to combat the threat from NATO, now claimed, "The Armed Forces of Ukraine were not going to attack Russia with NATO."

On Saturday morning, Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared on television and accused Prigozhin, but without mentioning him by name, of acting on behalf of NATO. Putin stated, "Today, Russia is waging a tough struggle for its future, repelling the aggression of neo-Nazis and their patrons. The entire military, economic and informational machine of the West is directed against us."

Later Saturday evening, with Wagner troops having taken over Rostov-on-Don and on the outskirts of Moscow, Prigozhin announced that they would retreat. His sudden retreat clearly indicates that the level of support he was counting on for a successful coup failed to materialize.

What led Prigozhin to launch his coup? First, it is evident that his escalating conflicts with the Russian state and military apparatus came to a head. The coup attempt was preceded by Prigozhin's vitriolic denunciations of Defense Minister Shoigu, whom he accused of not waging the war aggressively enough. It has been reported that funding for Wagner was to be substantially cut. Earlier this month, Prigozhin refused to accept Putin's demand that Wagner be placed under the control of the army leadership.

There is evidence that the military was fed up with Putin's long-time patronage of this foul-mouthed and disrespectful (to the military) thug. His operations in Ukraine, while useful to a limited extent, also interfered with the professional conduct of the war by trained officers. Prigozhin, one can safely surmise, attempted the

coup in order to preempt actions against him.

Second, it would be the height of political cluelessness to believe that NATO has been a passive bystander in the events of the last 24 to 36 hours. It has certainly been following the escalating war of words between Prigozhin and the Russian military with extreme care, and it can be assumed that it made contact with him. There is no other credible explanation for the pro-NATO justification made by Prigozhin upon launching the coup.

Prigozhin's NATO contacts would have had a good reason to demand that he act now. The coup has been launched less than three weeks into the NATO-backed counter-offensive by Ukraine. Having cost tens of billions of dollars to prepare, it has so far proven to be a debacle, with thousands of Ukrainian soldiers dying each day and only a few villages seized. In just over two weeks, NATO will be holding a major summit in Vilnius that, until the coup attempt, threatened to be dominated by Ukraine's military debacle.

The Biden administration and its NATO allies calculated that a coup attempt, even if not successful, would destabilize the regime and undermine its military operations. In any case, the coup attempt has shifted the media narrative away from the failed Ukrainian counter-offensive to the failing Putin regime.

The immediate response of high-level representatives of US imperialism, the Zelensky regime and the pro-NATO opposition within the Russian oligarchy makes clear that the coup did not come as a surprise.

US Army Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, who has been a key figure in the US preparations for war against Russia for over a decade, tweeted on Friday evening, "For all of those that have been wondering how the war in Ukraine is going, it's going insurrection-in-Russia well." Later into the coup, he suggested that NATO use the opportunity to extend its air defenses "100 miles into Ukraine."

Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin, one of the leading CIA Democrats in the US, tweeted, "U.S. posture at this stage should be watching events closely, assisting our Ukrainian allies in exploiting any battlefield opportunities, & staying flexible & alert at an unpredictable moment in history." Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also expressed support for Prigozhin's coup attempt.

London-based Russian ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a central figure in the NATO-backed operation to overthrow the Putin regime, endorsed the coup attempt as a "unique opportunity"

and called upon people to take up arms to ensure that Prigozhin could “survive and reach the Kremlin.” After Prigozhin’s retreat, Khodorkovsky celebrated the coup attempt as a major blow to the Putin regime on his Telegram account:

The scale of the damage to the regime is fantastic. Negotiations with Ukraine, if they start, will come from a much weaker position. The autonomy of the military, and thus its fighting ability, will be drastically reduced. The opposition will have to draw certain conclusions... [I]f the war does not end, a new insurgency is not long in coming. The tasks are clear. We will get to work.

That the coup was prepared with some significant level of NATO involvement is clear enough. But to portray the coup as primarily the product of a CIA conspiracy would be to ignore the real divisions that exist in the Russian regime and the social interests that determine its policies.

Prigozhin’s coup attempt exposes above all the bankruptcy of the Putin regime itself, out of which Prigozhin himself emerged. He is a Frankenstein monster created by Putin and over whom the Russian president lost control.

For decades, Putin and Prigozhin were close allies. Until recently, the Wagner group, which originated within the Russian military intelligence GRU, enjoyed the evident patronage of Putin and other powerful forces within the state apparatus.

Prigozhin, a fascistic war-lord, billionaire and convicted criminal, represents a substantial faction of the Russian oligarchy that opposes the war solely because Putin’s effort to protect the capitalist class’s and state’s privileged access to the country’s vast resources has cost them dearly.

Putin has sought to balance between these factions, and this attempt to reconcile opposing oligarchic interests has determined the conduct of what he still calls a “special military operation.”

From the beginning, the Kremlin’s policy in Ukraine has been based on the hope that limited military pressure could persuade the Western imperialist powers to accept the “legitimate” security interests of the Russian capitalist regime. Putin has persisted with this aim even as all of his “red lines” have been crossed, the latest “red line” being the attempt to overthrow him.

How Putin responds remains to be seen, whether through a military escalation or with significant concessions to reach some sort of accommodation. The imperialist powers, however, are not interested in compromise. Their ultimate goal is the carve-up of Russia so as to bring the vast resources of the entire former Soviet Union under their direct control.

Ultimately, both Putin and Prigozhin represent the same social class: an oligarchy, steeped in criminality and hatred of the working class, which has emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

Revealingly, in attacking their opponents in the ruling class, both Putin and Prigozhin have evoked above all the specter of the 1917 Russian Revolution, with Putin declaring of the coup that a “blow like this was dealt to Russia in 1917, when the country was

fighting in World War I. But the victory was stolen from it: intrigues, squabbles and politicking behind the backs of the army and the nation turned into the greatest turmoil, the destruction of the army and the collapse of the state, and the loss of vast territories, ultimately leading to the tragedy of the civil war.”

Putin’s latest denunciation of Bolshevism, aside from its pathologically obsessive character, exposes his own ignorance of history. In fact, the tsarist regime’s catastrophic entry into war in 1914, and its criminal mismanagement of the conflict, brought Russia to the brink of collapse. Confronted in 1917 with the outbreak of revolution, the efforts of the bourgeois Provisional Government to salvage its imperialist interests produced further disasters.

The attempt of General Kornilov, surreptitiously backed by Kerensky, to suppress the working class in September 1917 would have resulted, had it been successful, in the surrender of Petrograd to the armies of German imperialism. This outcome was prevented by a mass uprising of workers, mobilized by the Bolshevik Party, which crushed the coup and went on to seize power in October.

It was the new Soviet state that created the Red Army, led by Leon Trotsky, that between 1918 and 1921 routed the forces of counter-revolution backed by world imperialism.

The interests of the Russian and Ukrainian oligarchies preclude any progressive form of defense of the interests of the mass of the working people against the predatory policies of imperialism.

The principal fear, shared by all sections of the Russian oligarchy, is that the war will create conditions for a resurgence of the powerful traditions of Marxist internationalism within the Russian, Ukrainian and international working class. The war in Ukraine must be stopped through the independent revolutionary mobilization of the international working class, not the NATO-backed overthrow of the Putin regime and a carve-up of Russia.



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