

Kremlin allows Wagner to continue operations in Belarus as Prigozhin defends coup attempt as legitimate “demonstration”

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27 June 2023

In the days following the collapse of a coup attempt by the fascistic warlord, ex-convict and billionaire Evgeny Prigozhin and his mercenary Wagner army, the Kremlin has made clear that it will allow the insurrectionists to continue their operations in neighboring Belarus.

In his first address to the nation after the coup attempt on Monday, Vladimir Putin denounced the coup plotters, without naming Prigozhin, for having “betrayed their country, their people.” He claimed that the actions of the armed forces and a “consolidation of all of society” had ensured that bloodshed was prevented.

He said, “This outcome—fratricide—is precisely what the enemies of Russia wanted: both the neo-Nazis in Kiev and their Western backers and various kinds of traitors to the nation. They wanted that Russian soldiers kill each other, that servicemen and civilians die, so that in the end Russia would lose and our society fall apart, drowning in blood and internecine strife.”

Yet having effectively accused Prigozhin and Wagner of playing into the hands of Kiev and NATO and seeking to provoke a civil war, Putin then went on to praise the Wagner mercenaries for their “courage in battle” in Ukraine and invited them to “continue their service for Russia by entering a contract with the Ministry of Defense and other security agencies, or by returning to their loved ones. Who wants—can go to Belarus.”

The president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, has since confirmed that Prigozhin is in Belarus and that his fighters are welcome to set up their camps there. “Please, go ahead, we have a fence, everything’s there. Put up your tents. We’ll help with whatever we can.”

While some reports indicate that Wagner fighters in Russia will have to hand over their weapons to the Russian National Guard, those reports have not been confirmed. The vast majority of Wagner’s equipment and supplies over the years have been delivered by the Russian army. Russian media suggests that Wagner is continuing to openly recruit in many Russian cities.

Remarkably, Putin’s statement was released after Prigozhin

published an 11-minute audio recording on his Telegram channel, defending his coup attempt as a legitimate “demonstration.” In the recording, Prigozhin claimed that he never wanted to challenge the government but only the military leadership, prove its ineffectiveness and prevent the “destruction” of Wagner, which had earlier been ordered to subordinate to the command of the army. On its Telegram channel, Wagner has since effectively threatened that it will resume not only operations but also the coup attempt. On Tuesday, it published a video with men displaying tank shells and shouting, “We never get tired of repeating! We’ll be back! And again!”

Putin’s statement also came after Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced in an interview with “Russia Today” that on Monday Russian intelligence agencies are looking into the involvement of Western spies in the coup attempt.

Also on Monday, US President Joe Biden met with NATO leaders to, in his words, coordinate “our response and what to anticipate.” Biden then said, “We made clear that we were not involved. We had nothing to do with it. This was part of a struggle within the Russian system.”

Workers can believe Biden’s statements no more than any other of the countless lies that the US president has spouted about the war or any other aspect of his policy.

Prigozhin launched his coup attempt on Friday with a clear appeal to a substantial pro-NATO section of the Russian state and oligarchy. Ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a central figure in these regime change operations, called upon people to “take up arms” to support Prigozhin. On Tuesday, Khodorkovsky posted a message on his Telegram account, stating that the most important thing about the coup attempt was that it “happened” and that Prigozhin initiated it by denying that NATO had anything to do with the war in Ukraine.

However, as the *World Socialist Web Site* stressed in its statement on the failed coup attempt:

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.

This assessment has been fully borne out. On Tuesday, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko gave a press conference, telling reporters how he brokered a deal with Prigozhin, Putin and the head of the FSB, Alexander Bortnikov, on Saturday. Lukashenko recounted events as follows:

“Putin told me: ‘Look, Sasha [affectionate for “Alexander” in Russian], it’s no use. He [Prigozhin] doesn’t even pick up the phone, he doesn’t want to talk to anyone.’”

When Lukashenko asked Putin for Prigozhin's phone number, the Russian president replied, “Most likely, the FSB has his phone number.”

According to Lukashenko, Prigozhin “instantly picked up the phone. We talked the first round for about 30 minutes in foul language [mat’]. Extremely foul language. There were 10 times more obscene words than normal vocabulary (I analyzed that later).”

When Prigozhin demanded that a meeting with Putin and for the Kremlin to “give up” Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Russian Armed Forces Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov, Lukashenko replied:

“I say, ‘Zhenya [affectionate for “Evgeny”], no one will give you Shoigu or Gerasimov, no one, especially in this situation. You know Putin as well as I do. He won’t talk to you on the phone, let alone meet with you in this situation.’”

“They want to strangle us! We’ll go to Moscow!”—Prigozhin replied.

“I say, ‘Halfway there, they’ll just crush you like a bedbug. ... Think about it, I say. I told Putin, too: ‘We can whack him. It’s not a problem. If not at the first try, then at the second...’”

Lukashenko held another six or seven conversations with Prigozhin, who eventually agreed to give up his demands but was concerned what would happen to him and his fighters: “We stop—they’ll start pummeling us.”

Lukashenko responded, “They won’t. I guarantee you. I’ll take care of that.”

Lukashenko “took care of that” by speaking with Alexander Bortnikov, the head of the FSB, whom Prigozhin had apparently desperately tried to call before and telling him: “you have to pick up the phone if Prigozhin calls.” After negotiations with Bortnikov, Prigozhin felt assured that neither he nor his fighters would be “whacked” and announced a retreat.

This is the language, method and mindset of gangsters. While Lukashenko's account is no doubt only a small part of the truth, it is a good deal of the social truth behind the coup and its

collapse. Whatever their violent infighting, Prigozhin, Putin and Lukashenko are all the despicable social products of the Stalinist bureaucracy's destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991, which gave rise to a criminal oligarchy whose entire social existence and wealth are bound up with the systematic plunder and looting of the wealth created by the working class.

While Wagner was only formed in 2014-2015, the rise of private armies as major players in Russian politics was also intimately bound up with the restoration of capitalism. In the 1990s, during the so called “oligarch wars,” virtually every oligarch maintained his own private security or paramilitary unit. Overwhelmingly recruited from veterans of the special military forces and the secret service FSB, these private armies helped individual oligarchs seize control of critical companies and raw material resources and “neutralize” (and often kill) other rivals among the oligarchs and mafia.

Today, the private security sector encompasses about 23,000 firms and employs an estimated 700,000 people. Like Wagner itself, dozens of such private armies have been deployed in various wars abroad. The majority of them are largely supplied with equipment from the state and army and are closely interwoven with state security and military structures.

Prigozhin's coup attempt is the most extreme expression to date of the infighting between warring factions of the oligarchy, which has been fueled by the war and in which the imperialist powers are aggressively intervening in order to achieve a regime change and a carve-up of Russia. However, above all, it highlights the reactionary character of the ruling class that emerged out of the restoration of capitalism. Workers must fight against the imperialist war in Ukraine and oppose the regime change operations of imperialism. But this fight cannot be conducted without a determined struggle against the criminal oligarchies that emerged out of the Stalinist reaction against the October Revolution of 1917 and the entire social system over which they rule: capitalism.



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