

Putin met with Prigozhin and Wagner commanders days after insurrection

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On Monday, on the eve of the NATO summit in Vilnius which is set to discuss a significant escalation of NATO's direct involvement in the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin confirmed that Russian President Vladimir Putin had met with Evgeny Prigozhin on June 29, just five days after Prigozhin's failed coup attempt. The news of the meeting had first been reported on Friday by the French newspaper *Libération*.

After months of open conflicts with the Russian army leadership, Prigozhin, a far-right ex-convict-turned-billionaire and mercenary leader, launched his insurrection on June 23 with a direct appeal to pro-NATO sections within the Russian oligarchy and state apparatus. Having seized control of the main military headquarters in charge of the war in Ukraine, Prigozhin began a march on Moscow on June 24, demanding that Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief-of-Staff Valery Gerasimov be removed from their positions.

According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, Putin invited 35 people to a meeting just five days after the insurrection collapsed, including all leading commanders of Wagner. Sergei Naryshkin, the head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence, and Viktor Zolotov, the head of the Russian National Guard, which was deployed against the insurrectionists, also participated in the meeting.

Peskov revealed very little about the contents of the meeting but clearly indicated that a settlement had been reached between Putin and the commanders of Wagner: "The only thing we can say is that the President gave an assessment of the actions of the [Wagner] company at the front during the SVO [Special Military Operation], and also gave his assessment of the events of June 24. The commanders themselves provided their interpretation of events. They emphasized that they are convinced supporters and soldiers of the head of state and the commander-in-chief [Putin]. They also said that they are prepared to continue to fight for the Motherland."

The meeting took place just two days after Putin denounced the insurrectionists as traitors on public television, accusing them of fomenting civil war and playing into the hands of NATO. In the two weeks that have followed the coup attempt, the Kremlin's official line has been marked, despite many countless twists and turns, by an extraordinary degree of leniency toward Wagner.

In the immediate wake of the coup, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, in language commonly used by mafiosi, boasted of having brokered a deal between Putin and Prigozhin during the insurrection. The deal reportedly involved not only an amnesty for Prigozhin and all Wagner fighters but also their relocation to Belarus. That relocation, however, has not happened.

Prigozhin is still predominantly based in Russia, with the Kremlin stating last week that they had neither "the ability nor the willingness" to track his whereabouts. Lukashenko, after declaring that the Belarusian army would be happy to be trained by Wagner, invited reporters from the *New York Times* last week to the camps designed for Wagner to demonstrate to the pro-NATO media that they were not there.

Wagner is reportedly also freely continuing to recruit across the country. A raid on Prigozhin's home was followed almost immediately by the return of his valuables, including his private firearms. The *Financial Times* tracked the movement of Prigozhin's private jet and found that he had flown back and forth between Moscow, St. Petersburg, Rostov on Don (where the insurrection started) and Minsk, in Belarus, multiple times in the days following the failed coup.

In the Russian media, there has been a concerted campaign to ridicule Prigozhin, but even that campaign now raises more questions than it answers. The *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* noted in a comment that the state-run TV channels were "exposing Prigozhin in a way that

actually looks like advertisement for him.”

It is not even clear whether the Kremlin will go after Prigozhin’s extensive Wagner empire, which stretches over a dozen countries and includes a large number of companies and has turned Prigozhin into a billionaire. As Putin himself revealed after the insurrection, the Wagner company has been funded primarily by the Russian state with state contracts worth over 86 billion rubles (almost \$950 million) between May 2022 and May 2023 alone.

In the Russian army, the Kremlin has begun an investigation into the role of different army commanders in the coup attempt, but even here it is unclear how extensive the investigation is and how seriously it is being conducted. Commenting on the investigation in the army, the *Novaya Gazeta*, an outlet that is affiliated with the US-backed anti-Putin opposition, reported on Friday, “There is a growing sense, that ‘the President’s Chef [Prigozhin]’ had and perhaps still has allies. ...Generals are being called in as witnesses and are disappearing into thin air.”

The newspaper added that in the many months during which Prigozhin launched open and repeated foul-mouthed attacks on the army leadership of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief-of-Staff Valery Gerasimov, not a single army commander came out to defend them. Moreover, the newspaper reported that Prigozhin has systematically and openly tried to recruit active or retired generals and commanders from the army who were dissatisfied with the way the war was being handled.

Thus, Lieutenant General Mikhail Mizintsev, who was involved in the Russian military operation in Syria and the seizure of Mariupol in Ukraine, went over to Wagner after being discharged from the army. Based on anonymous sources, the *Novaya Gazeta* wrote that Prigozhin had made “tempting offers in the winter of 2022-2023 to other very high-ranking commanders. They all had their own views on the SVO [Special Military Operation] and also pointed to mistakes that had to be urgently corrected. All of these offers were made openly, the Ministry of Defense knew about them. All of their telephone conversations were also surveilled.”

The many contradictions in the official line and the very fact that Prigozhin, after launching an insurrection based on a repeat of lies that NATO neither provoked nor was involved in the conflict, is allowed to continue his activities, indicate an extreme level of crisis and divisions within the Russian ruling class and state apparatus. This crisis and these divisions can only be understood based on

the class character and historical origins of the ruling oligarchy, which has emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism.

In a statement on the failed coup, the WSWS noted that Prigozhin

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.

Two weeks later, and with the NATO summit about to convene in Vilnius, this assessment has been fully borne out. While it remains to be seen how the Putin regime will respond to a new escalation of the war being prepared by NATO, the events of the past weeks have exposed not only its fragility. Above all, they have starkly revealed the bankruptcy and criminal character of the entire Russian oligarchy whose primary fear and concern always has been, not the various inter-oligarchic squabbles over assets or a war with NATO, but the development of an independent political movement by the working class and the revival of the internationalist Marxist traditions of the October Revolution.



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