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The Wagner rebellion that wasn't. A view from Riga on Lukashenka's PR victory

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On the late evening of 23 June 2023, Latvians were marking the Midsummer festival. The celebrations were disturbed by Yevgeny Prigozhin's announcement that his mercenary Wagner group, best known for spearheading Russia's Africa policy and operations in Syria, is staging a rebellion. Whereas potent tools of Russia's global policy, Wagner forces are known for operating outside of the regular army and relying on several income streams besides exerting extreme violence on behalf of non-democratic regimes for propelling its business model. In the first year of the war in Ukraine alone, Prigozhin's company made 3 billion USD (equivalent to 6% of Russia's defence spending)ⁱ – making him a powerful warlord with his own army. Prigozhin arguably marched “for justice” and against the pronounced “lack of ammunition” his forces were facing in Ukraine, and the mismanagement of the Russian forces in frontlines.

Most importantly, he marched to express his discontent with the decision to force all Wagner fighters to sign a contract with the Russian army, *de facto* incorporating it into the Russian military structures. Prigozhin realized that this meant the end of his power. On his way to Moscow, he demanded speaking to the Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and the Chief of Staff Valery Gerassimov. Prigozhin was longing for revenge, as these were the men who likely convinced Putin of the necessity to eliminate Prigozhin, who had not shied away from criticizing the incompetence of Russia's leading military strategists. Prigozhin omitted to criticize President Putin, his long-standing friend. However, Putin recognized the threat thrown to his system, especially after Prigozhin came out with statements questioning the official narrative of Moscow on its motive to invade Ukraine.ⁱⁱ Putin realized that Prigozhin was marching to Moscow to rid the country of the current cronies – and replace them with others. Therefore, Putin's recorded speech on the morning of 24 June spoke of treachery and referenced 1917, after which Russia saw “the tragedy of the civil war”.ⁱⁱⁱ Arguably, by the time it was aired, Putin had left Moscow for Saint Petersburg, fearing for his own safety.

Prigozhin's decision to turn back puzzled many Western thinkers, confused by the chaos of Russian politics. Some spoke of them naively, giving too much credit to what they called “Putin's clever plot” to rid himself of all potential rivals with a single blow. For them, Prigozhin is just a pawn in Putin's greater strategy. Others argued that

Prigozhin was counting on more support from Russian army generals who eventually decided not to join the rebellion. However, the consensus is that Wagner's mutiny exposed the utter decay of the Russian state. Russia's lawless future will be determined by the superiority of one gang of cronies over the other. Putin's system, where he was the only man strong enough to hold the vertical of power together, crumbled with each minute of the 36 hours Prigozhin was heading in the direction of Moscow. Furthermore, the people did not object – in Rostov and Voronezh, they greeted the tanks not with resistance, but with a strange mix of curiosity, joy, and resignation. The popular support of Putin is therefore as hollow as the state he has built.

Reacting to the events in Moscow, the opposition forces reached out to the public. On 24 June, the Kalinoŭski Regiment, consisting of Belarusian volunteers fighting on the side of the Ukrainian army against Russia, announced their readiness to liberate Belarus from dictatorship and occupation if the chance arises.^{iv} The office of the president-elect Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya called to unite against the problem sitting in the Presidential palace of Belarus.^v Restless attempts by opposition figures – including the “Plan Peramoga”^{vi} – were loudly referenced as potential instruments that can be used in the window of opportunity opened by Prigozhin's rebellion.^{vii} The Belarusian opposition was ready to seize the window of opportunity and take charge of the future of their country – which, of course, only created a headache for Lukashenka.

In these circumstances, Putin was saved by an unlikely hero who has so often been mocked by official Russian propaganda channels – the most pro-Russian politician in the “post-Soviet space”, Aleksandr Lukashenka.

Lukashenka – the unlikely hero

Lukashenka quickly took credit for talking Prigozhin out of spilling any more Russian blood. Clearly, destabilization of the Kremlin is not in his interest – not least when he has made Belarus co-responsible for Russia's bloody war in Ukraine. However, the biggest paradox lies in the fact that Wagner forces were projected as a threat to the broader public only recently. In the middle of 2020, Belarusian authorities arrested

more than 30 Wagner fighters suspecting them of plotting to interfere in the presidential elections that Lukashenka violently stole. Back then, according to the Belarusian Security Council, some 200 [Moscow-backed] foreign fighters had infiltrated Belarus to destabilize the country.^{viii} With this move, the official Minsk signalled – only Lukashenka could guarantee Belarusian sovereignty. It is therefore clear that the danger calculus has since drastically changed – and that Prigozhin is certainly not loyal to Putin anymore. If Prigozhin had achieved a change in the power vertical in Moscow, the repercussions on Lukashenka’s power could be catastrophic.

Outwardly, Lukashenka’s impeccable PR stunt put him in the international limelight again. And it’s not the first time. Lukashenka has offered a haven for political exiles before – such as the Kyrgyz ex-president Kurmanbek Bakiev, whom Lukashenka refused to surrender to Kyrgyz authorities. In 2010, among public protests, Bakiev allowed the anti-riot forces to open fire on the crowds of people. Lukashenka defended his motives, arguing that it was self-defence, whilst the opposition claimed that Bakiev had tried to strengthen his control of state structures.^{ix} Lukashenka’s calculus back then was simple – it is only fair that he defends a fellow authoritarian, acquiring a chance to cement his own role in regional affairs. Accepting Prigozhin in the territory of Belarus allowed him to position official Minsk as a diplomatic mediator, favouring peaceful resolution of all conflicts, including this brotherly brawl between two Russian patriots. One can also remember the attempts to pacify Russia and Ukraine after the first Russian invasion in 2014. However, it is getting increasingly difficult for Lukashenka to hide its fear of the inevitable downfall behind such diplomatic overtures. Lukashenka was therefore ready to do what it takes to save Putin – to save himself.

Suddenly, the roles of Lukashenka and Putin were switched. Whereas it had been Moscow that had always bailed out Minsk, this time around, Lukashenka saved Putin. The spike in Lukashenka’s coverage in international headlines is likely to return him with some credibility domestically. After the *de facto* occupation of Belarus in February 2024 Lukashenka’s quick diplomacy may partially re-establish the illusion of independence that is important for his legitimacy. Some experts close to Lukashenka have been quick to speculate he may acquire some influence on policy-making in

Moscow.^x Even more importantly, Prigozhin's rebellion has weakened Putin, and his future in the Russian power vertical seems more uncertain. Realizing this, Lukashenka may already be on the lookout for new opportunities after the war. Some speculate that the full incorporation of Belarus into Russia – the completion of the Union State – may be the only comfort for Russia after the inevitable loss in the war with Ukraine. Perhaps Lukashenka hopes to become its first president.^{xi} The relative power position of Lukashenka does not, however, change the fact that Belarus is still perceived as a vassal of Russia which seeks to strengthen its power in territories it considers historically Russian.

Prigozhin's future in Belarus

The decision of Prigozhin to pull back his forces provided some expected disappointment. Knowing he has a target on his back and lacking the support he hoped to gather, Prigozhin accepted the proposal of the Belarusian self-proclaimed president to stop the movement of armed personnel of the Wagner company inside Russia, and take additional steps to de-escalate the tension, as well as relocate his units – and himself – to Belarus.

Whereas Prigozhin's whereabouts are currently unknown, his future role in Belarus remains the biggest mystery. Lukashenka managed to negotiate safe passage for him and the Wagner troops – proven by the fact that Russian authorities closed criminal investigations against Prigozhin and all other participants of the rebellion.^{xii} However, Prigozhin must have been provided with a potential scenario for his future. Speculation about him being given an assignment in Africa has been raised. Since the strengthening of Western sanctions against Belarusian authorities has gone hand in hand with sanctioning Russia, Lukashenka has sought to broaden the Belarusian export markets to African countries; the interests of both men therefore align. Prigozhin could also leave his position at Wagner peacefully – and turn back to his restaurant business, opening a chain in Belarus. Some have optimistically claimed that Lukashenka has now acquired not only nuclear weapons but also a battle-trained and well-equipped army. Prigozhin's status as a dangerous man with a loyal army on his side could be a real asset in the hands of Lukashenka in his attempts to

counterbalance Moscow's power. However, it is unclear if Lukashenka could offer Prigozhin any meaningful resource in return. Furthermore, Prigozhin may not have lost all leverage on Putin. Western reports indicate that Putin and Prigozhin may have met in the days following the rebellion.^{xiii} Whereas it is currently unclear what was discussed in the meeting, Prigozhin and his entourage walked out of the said meeting alive.

Recent days have brought a confirmation that Prigozhin is currently not located in Belarus, but in Saint Petersburg^{xiv}, which has also been officially voiced by Lukashenka in a press conference^{xv}. The majority of Wagner's forces are not found in tents that were quickly built on Belarusian territory either.^{xvi} In the meanwhile, the Russian state has launched a PR campaign against Prigozhin after raiding his office and house in Saint Petersburg.^{xvii} Therefore, it seems that Prigozhin's existence in any meaningful position (or alive) even outside Russia reminds the world about the shame he brought to Putin and his regime.

Why the relocation of Wagner forces to Belarus matters to Riga

Authorities in Riga were carefully observing the situation unfolding in Russia and Belarus in the last days of June. Whereas the Baltic policymakers realized that the rebellion does not target them, the unfolding of events was broadly scrutinized.^{xviii} Latvia has learned its lessons when it comes to building close ties to Belarus. For years it was putting effort into keeping Belarus into the orbit of the EU by promoting the Eastern Partnership initiative and engaging in economic cooperation – even lobbying for the lifting of most sanctions in 2015.^{xix} Since the violent suppression of protests in 2020, Latvian foreign policy has shown Belarus teeth, officially calling Lukashenka the “illegitimate president”.^{xx} Since Belarus became a platform for launching Russia's bloody war in Ukraine, Riga has declared Belarus co-responsible for the war and called for continued sanctions policy against the regime.^{xxi}

The Latvian foreign policy line has now merged its attitudes towards Russia and Belarus, refusing to apply a different approach to Minsk until the end of the war in Ukraine.



Lukashenka retaliated, carrying out the nefarious hybrid attacks since Autumn 2021, by funnelling migrants from the Middle East to the border of Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Latvia faced further complications in its public image after Amnesty International emitted a report, quoting the various shortcomings of methods used to control the illegal migration on Latvia's borders.^{xxii} The current Baltic narrative focuses primarily on threats posed by migration. The Wagner forces located in Belarus could try to enter the territory of the EU through Belarus by the same methods as migrants from the Middle East.^{xxiii} The announcements of the days following the Wagner rebellion mostly spoke about the protection of Latvia's borders and verifying the personalities of the people crossing the border, thus ensuring Latvia's national security interests.^{xxiv} The newly elected President and ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs spoke of the need to further strengthen the Eastern border of Latvia, not least by completing the fence stretching along the border of Belarus. Initially conceived as a tool to protect itself from illegal migration in 2016, the need to finish the infrastructure project is now even more pressing. Rinkēvičs also referenced the need to speed up the building of the Selonia Military Training Area. Its building was confirmed on June 22 by the Latvian Saeima (Parliament), establishing the prerequisites for the creation of a new Military Training Area in the territories of Jēkabpils and Aizkraukles counties.^{xxv} The new training centre will serve in the direct interests of Latvia's national defence, as it will host the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group in Latvia.

Immediately after Prigozhin's arrival in Belarus was confirmed on 27 June, the Baltic Foreign Ministers came out with statements on the need to ramp up NATO defences on the eastern border. Geography plays an important role not only because of the increased risk of migration but also the NATO summit in Vilnius on 11 and 12 July 2023, where the potential guarantees of Ukraine joining NATO and further NATO enlargement in Sweden will be discussed. Vilnius lies less than 50 kilometres from the border of Belarus. Therefore, the presence of Belarusian mercenaries has been even more feared. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said, "The speed with which Wagner had advanced on Moscow - driving hundreds of kilometres in a one-day

race towards the capital - showed that the defence of Baltic states should be firmed up".^{xxvi}

Overall, the reaction of the Latvian authorities indicates that plans for preparation for any scenario are underway. The regime in Belarus is perceived as the conjoint twin of Russia, which is fully dependent on the stability of Putin's position. However, this also means that a blow to Putin's power is perceived with great hope – as an opening of a window of opportunity for Belarusians who have long been waiting to get out of the Russian sphere of influence.



ENDNOTES

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