

Russian Progressives and Antiwar Forces May Find Opening in Wake of Failed Coup

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Yevgeny Prigozhin's attempted coup is over, but it could still have far-reaching consequences for Putin's government.

After months of denouncing the nation's military brass, Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin led Wagner Group mercenaries in an attempted coup d'état against President Vladimir Putin's regime. After a day when Putin's rule seemed in jeopardy, the Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko brokered a deal to resolve the crisis — at least for now. While the U.S. made it clear that they had nothing to do with the uprising, it did take advantage of the moment to impose a new round of [sanctions on the Wagner Group](#).

In this exclusive interview, Ashley Smith speaks with Russian socialist Ilya Budraitskis about Prigozhin, his coup attempt and the fate of Putin's regime and its imperialist war on Ukraine. Budraitskis is the author of [Dissident Among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia](#). He writes regularly for [openDemocracy](#), [Jacobin](#), and other publications. He will be joining Ukrainian socialist Alona Liasheva on a [speaking tour](#) this fall in the U.S. beginning at the [Socialism Conference](#).

Ashley Smith: Who is Yevgeny Prigozhin and what is the Wagner Group? How has Russian imperialism used the Wagner Group in Ukraine and other countries?

Ilya Budraitskis: Prigozhin was born in Saint Petersburg, where, during his youth, he was involved in organized crime, robbery and violent assault, all of which landed him in jail for a long prison term during the 1980s. In jail, he developed connections with other criminals who helped set up his business career.

When he got out of jail, he organized a catering company in Saint Petersburg in the 1990s when the state, criminality and capitalism were deeply intertwined. By catering to various state institutions, he established an intimate relationship with Vladimir Putin.

He became "Putin's Chef," providing meals for the president and foreign dignitaries, [including George W. Bush](#). He achieved notoriety as "The King of State Contracts" in the 2000s, enriching himself like other oligarchs with streams of cash from Putin's regime.

Putin used this dependency to get Prigozhin to do his bidding. For example, Putin turned to Prigozhin to build a ["a troll farm"](#) to churn out fake news to try and influence the 2016 U.S. election in Donald Trump's favor.

Prigozhin also set up the Wagner Group through connections he developed by catering for the Russian Army. While private, Wagner has always been dependent on the Russian Army for its officer core and training facilities.

Putin deployed Wagner mercenaries in Ukraine to carry out the seizure of Crimea and sections of Donbas in 2014. The company's nominally private status gave Putin the ability to deny that Russia was directly involved in these operations.

Putin then sent Wagner into Syria, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali, Libya, and a few other countries. And, when his attempt to seize all of Ukraine in 2022 failed and Russia forces got bogged down defending occupied territories, Putin again relied upon Wagner.

In an attempt to shield the Russian population from the war and avoid imposing the draft, he got Wagner and other mercenaries to do the heavy fighting. Putin allowed Prigozhin to replenish his forces by hiring prisoners, promising them amnesty and redemption as Russian military heroes.

Putin, however, never surrendered his regime's monopoly over the means of violence. That was never broken, but it was blurred by Wagner's relative autonomy from direct state control.

Why did Prigozhin stage this uprising against Putin's military leadership?

The trigger for the uprising was Prigozhin's conflict with the Russian minister of defense, Sergei Shoigu, and the chief of the general staff, Valery Gerasimov, over the status of the Wagner Group and the war itself. These two are not only military leaders but also big business players, controlling the enormous military budget and all sorts of subsidiary corporations.

They saw Prigozhin as a threat because he challenged their control of the military. Prigozhin boasted about Wagner's victories especially in Bakhmut, claimed his troops were superior to the army, and denounced Shoigu and Gerasimov for their incompetent leadership of the invasion.

There is no doubt that Prigozhin's denunciations of the war, exposure of the lies that justified it and attacks on Shoigu and Gerasimov resonated with already demoralized Russian troops.

In response, they ordered the incorporation of Wagner into the army. Cornered, Prigozhin redoubled his attack on the two leaders, even accusing the Russian Army of [carrying out an airstrike on a Wagner base](#).

He delivered a stream of speeches over Telegram mimicking the message of the deceased far right political leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Prigozhin claimed to be standing up for Russia's little man against the corrupt elite and promised that the restoration of the Russian Empire would improve their lot in life.

He even turned against the war itself. He gave a speech puncturing Putin's entire case for the war, saying it was [based on lies](#), that NATO and Ukraine were not a threat and that the war was unnecessary. He declared that the high command launched it to enrich themselves, sacrificing ordinary Russian soldiers and Russian people in the process. He promised to restore justice and punish the oligarchs.

A lot of this was far right bombast from a desperate oligarch, but it connected with the deep grievances in many sectors from lower levels of the military brass to ordinary people. Some liked Prigozhin's message because of its patriotism, others because of its criticism of the war and still others because it simply told truths previously unarticulated on a mass level.

Sensing his opportunity, Prigozhin launched his coup. There is little doubt that at least a layer of generals and intelligence services [knew about it in advance](#). But the Russian repressive forces, which could have easily crushed his force of 4,000 mercenaries, adopted a neutral stance, letting the

coup start.

They shared Prigozhin's criticisms of the high command and its incompetence and looked on him as one of their own. Some may have even [supported his demand to fire Shoigu and Gerasimov](#). They allowed Wagner to take over Rostov-on-Don, a city of 1.2 million people and the main command center for Russia's war in Ukraine.

They stood by when the convoy headed north toward Moscow, shot down Russian helicopters and came within 125 miles of the capital. But no significant section of the military, government and state bureaucracy backed Prigozhin in overthrowing Putin's regime.

Why did Putin not crush the uprising?

The starting point to answer this question is to grasp just how threatened Putin felt. He fled Moscow in his private jet to find safe haven in his residence north of the city. Once he realized that the military and police were letting the coup happen, he went on TV denouncing it as treason and a threat to the Russian state to rally state institutions to his side.

After that, all the political leaders, who had been silent for much of the day, publicly expressed their support for Putin. The media, which had been utterly disoriented and unsure of what to say, returned to their usual programming of churning out Putin talking points, in this case support for his continued rule.

Putin realized the weakness of his regime and feared an open confrontation. So, he opened negotiations through his Kremlin intermediaries as well as Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko with Prigozhin, who realized that he lacked support for a coup and sought out a deal to save himself and his business.

The terms seem to be that Prigozhin will leave Russia for Belarus, Wagner forces that did not participate in the coup will be absorbed into the army, and those that did will be disbanded or allowed leave the country and establish a base in Belarus. All sides wanted to resolve the crisis without bloodshed and bury it as quickly as possible.

The Russian media, which is always unhinged from reality, is now saying it's all over, nothing really threatened the state, and everything is now back to normal. They now present Putin as having passed a test and [proved himself stronger than ever](#).

This is in line with their usual lionization of Putin as some masterful strategist capable of three-dimensional chess that Russian mortals can't possibly understand. Many in the population may be willing to accept the media's story because they are afraid of civil war and have no access to any alternative explanations and perspectives.

But the Russian elite do not accept the media's propaganda. For them, Putin was acceptable because he was a strong leader that would stand up against Europe or the U.S., protect their interests, guarantee security and ensure the flow of profits into their bank accounts.

Prigozhin's uprising shattered that image of Putin. Now, the elite see that Putin is weak, that he fled and that he was forced to cut a deal with one of his own gangsters. Thus, his hold on the elite has been fundamentally compromised.

What impact will this crisis have on the solidity of the Russian state?

Putin's regime has been profoundly shaken and [his continued rule put in jeopardy](#). Let's look at his

key bases of support. First, the army. We know that a whole layer of its leadership had been skeptical about the war to begin with, shared Prigozhin's criticisms of Shoigu and Gerasimov, and therefore adopted a neutral stance during his uprising.

Whole sections of the state bureaucracy share those sentiments. So do oligarchs who've seen their bank accounts frozen, sanctions imposed on their operations and their profits and wealth undermined.

At the same time, all these circles fear instability, the weakening of the regime and the destabilization of the state itself. Many hope to use the crisis precipitated by Prigozhin's coup attempt to make Putin more sensitive to the needs of the Russian elite, military and state bureaucracy.

The future of the regime depends on the army and its fortunes on the battlefield. Putin will do everything in his power to shore up the military forces and ensure their fighting capacity against Ukraine's counteroffensive. He could even escalate the war.

He will also likely turn to greater repression inside Russia. Just like every authoritarian leader, Putin is extremely paranoid about threats to his regime and sees traitors lurking in every corner.

He's already repressed the liberal opposition, antiwar activists and the left. Now he may go after those in the army and among the oligarchs he suspects of disloyalty. Rather than solidifying his rule, however, such paranoid vengeance will actually further destabilize his regime.

What impact will this uprising have on the Russian occupation forces in Ukraine?

There is no doubt that Prigozhin's denunciations of the war, exposure of the lies that justified it and attacks on Shoigu and Gerasimov resonated with already demoralized Russian troops. Their weakened morale and the disbanding of Wagner could undermine the army.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive's chances of success have been improved by these developments. But Putin realizes this and will do everything in his power to bolster their lines of defense.

They have already set up barriers and laid countless land mines [along the front](#) and are prepared to back it up with artillery and air power. But all those preparations will only work if the soldiers are prepared to fight.

So, the decisive question is the morale of the rank-and-file soldiers. Will they be willing to kill and die for Putin, Shoigu, Gerasimov and the Russian elite?

What impact will this all have on the progressive opposition to Putin?

To an extent space has been opened up by the destabilization of the regime. Some prominent [Russian liberals even expressed support](#) for Prigozhin's uprising as an opportunity to call into question Putin's regime.

At a mass level, people were at least for a time able to express criticism, which has been nearly impossible for people to do when it has been illegal to even call Russia's invasion of Ukraine a war. In the case of Rostov-on-Don, people turned out in large numbers to [support Prigozhin and his mercenaries](#).

This situation can provide political activists an opening to distribute progressive and antiwar literature. At the same time, that could put people at risk since the regime will crackdown on any

such activity.

There is also a danger that oligarchs and the far right will build more private armies to protect themselves and advance their interests. This would likely close the space for democratic forces to develop.

What will this mean for the trajectory of Russia's imperialist war in Ukraine?

Everything depends on the success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. The best result would be for Ukraine to liberate as much of its territory as possible. That will determine the terms of any ceasefire or negotiations.

The counteroffensive will also shape the behavior of U.S. and NATO powers, which all reacted to Prigozhin's coup by expressing concern about the regime's control of its nuclear weapons. They made clear that while they might want Putin's regime weakened, they do not want its hold on that stockpile undermined, [nor the regime overthrown](#).

They may be predisposed to cut a deal with Putin to preserve stability. He will double down on this nuclear blackmail to preserve as many of his territorial gains as possible. Any such agreement would set a terrible precedent of an imperialist power using its nuclear missiles to secure colonial conquest.

In this situation, the international left should redouble its support of the Ukrainian resistance, the Russian antiwar movement and each country's left. Only those forces can win self-determination, democracy, equality and justice in both Ukraine and Russia.

Ashley Smith is a socialist writer and activist in Burlington, Vermont. He has written in numerous publications including Truthout, *The International Socialist Review*, *Socialist Worker*, *ZNet*, *Jacobin*, *New Politics*, and many other online and print publications. He is currently working on a book for Haymarket Books entitled *Socialism and Anti-Imperialism*.

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