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## Prigozhin: Mutiny And Retreat

### *Prigozhin's Intentions*

On 23 June, Wagner forces under the leadership of Yevgeny Prigozhin mutinied and orchestrated a revolt against Russia's minister of defence, Sergei Shoigu and its chief of the general staff, Valery Gerasimov, threatening to march on Moscow with a force of 25 thousand men if they were not removed. The pretext for this development was an alleged rocket strike by Russian forces on a Wagner camp in occupied Ukraine, although [some commentators](#) believe it may have been staged. That night, Prigozhin's forces entered Rostov-on-Don, where they occupied the Southern Military District headquarters, and moved into Voronezh region. Prigozhin claimed that the regular army was not resisting and that soldiers were joining Wagner's ranks. By then, it was clear that he had dared organise a rebellion against the Ministry of Defence, ignoring Putin's existence entirely.

On 25 June, [The Washington Post](#), [CNN](#) and [The New York Times](#) reported simultaneously that intelligence officers had gleaned that Prigozhin was preparing for the rebellion, including stockpiling weapons and ammunition. They knew about Prigozhin's preparations and briefed congressional leaders, known as the Gang of Eight, last week. However, neither US nor European intelligence officials predicted that Prigozhin would move to storm the Russian region of Rostov with his forces, according to sources familiar with the intelligence. Russia's own intelligence services were in turn criticised for missing Prigozhin's preparations entirely, regardless of his increasing erraticism in recent months (it appears to have specifically accelerated from mid-May).

There were three main factors behind this escalating behaviour and the absence of action to stop it:

#### **Prigozhin's descent into desperation**

*R.Politik* has serious grounds to believe that Prigozhin acted alone, without direction or support from anyone at the top of Russia's power vertical. Rather than being a figurehead for other interests, it seems that the war and

subsequent circumstances for Prigozhin simply made him desperate. It appears that Prigozhin lost touch with reality after months on the battlefield, where he witnessed the deaths of thousands of his men. Even the most loyal players who are utterly dependent on the Kremlin (which by no means implies total control) can lose their sense of proportion. Starting from January, he had to face a new reality: his most despised enemy, Valery Gerasimov, was appointed to lead the “special military operation”. Gerasimov's promotion overlapped with ammunition shortages, a ban on recruiting in prisons and a media boycott.

Feeling politically abandoned and threatened by top army bosses and the FSB, his actions gradually radicalised, each time pushing the confrontation further but receiving neither redress nor pushback from the top. For a long time, Prigozhin was out of direct contact with Putin, deprived of the opportunity to speak or meet with the president. He faced indifference or even hostility from the Presidential Administration and was constantly told to deal directly with Gerasimov and Shoigu (he loathes both and was unable to work with either). As we noted in a previous [bulletin](#), Prigozhin concluded his “mission” in Ukraine with significant losses, humiliated by the disregard shown him, in conflict with the system and deprived of any opportunity to maintain his status/position despite arguably having achieved the only real military success that Russia has managed since the summer of 2022. Despite his probably feelings of exclusion, it appears that the war also intensified his pride in his own efforts and success, supported by the belief that he was still Putin's man and had the backing of the president. He felt that his actions in Ukraine had made him a military hero.

Prigozhin's growing popularity, as well as the unpopularity of Gerasimov and Shoigu, could have warped his judgement too. Wagner soldiers demonstrated a high level of cohesion and appear to have acquiesced to the mutiny without many reservations, showing loyalty to their leader as opposed to the state, despite potential negative consequences. It appears that his desperation and psychological state were underestimated by observers; his actions were typically explained away as schemes to get more media attention.

### **Putin's silence and detachment**

Putin's seeming indifference towards escalating problems created a political vacuum. Prigozhin faced no serious resistance to his increasingly daring,

insubordinate behaviour. The president's general aloofness and laissez faire attitude towards the Wagner boss may have made Prigozhin feel untouchable.

Putin's position was partially a result of his own prejudices: he always saw Prigozhin as a genuine patriot (albeit occasionally 'crazy'), a hero, loyal, and above all, controllable. Putin tolerated Prigozhin's antics, underestimating the latter's psychological state and political ambitions. This fundamental belief that a true patriot couldn't turn against the regime, has now been utterly disproven (which will have consequences). Putin also assumed Prigozhin had been politically isolated, and therefore harmless. He does not have a political party, does not appear on TV and does not hold rallies. From Putin's perspective, Prigozhin was simply not a political figure, but a servant of the state, officially working on his own initiative for the sake of plausible deniability. The president has little grasp of the internet's potential as a rallying tool; he failed to understand that his presence in the online information space yielded greater visibility and influence than appearances on TV.

For the first six months of the war, Putin did not object to Prigozhin's "assistance", culminating in his approving a plan last August for Wagner forces to spearhead the seizure of Bakhmut. In January, when Putin decided to consolidate the chain of command so that all Russian forces would coalesce under one military hierarchy, he had no doubt that Prigozhin would comply. He believed that the conflict between Wagner and the Ministry of Defence was just an unpleasant side effect of the war, and a price the Kremlin had to pay because 'real patriots' were fighting for the country's interests but had slightly differing views on how to serve them. Peskov even commented at the time that all of the groups fighting in Ukraine were serving the Motherland.

These considerations may help explain why the FSB "failed" to prevent the mutiny: reports about the increasing danger from Prigozhin and the risk of a mutiny would not have fitted into Putin's vision of the situation. Furthermore, it was well-known that FSB considered Prigozhin a threat and was trying to curb his activity on social media. Their concerns may have just been mistaken for corporate interest (and may also genuinely have been motivated by this) or hawkish paranoia.

**The state's hands were tied**

Prigozhin has intimidated many within the establishment, making numerous enemies – including within the FSB, the *siloviki* generally, the Presidential Administration, among governors, and within the cabinet. Many figures warned that he was becoming dangerous, both behind closed doors, and [openly](#) (Rus). They pointed out that the Wagner boss had been crossing the regime's red lines with impunity, weakening state institutions and undermining the armed forces during wartime, all of which were unacceptable. Yet this apparently fell on deaf ears. In the absence of a clear signal from Putin, senior officials felt they couldn't take action against Prigozhin at their own initiative. As we have explained in previous bulletins, the FSB and the Presidential Administration attempted to tackle Wagner indirectly, severing his access to TV coverage, firing journalists who interviewed him and spreading dirt on social media. But they could not do this openly – far less attack Prigozhin head-on. Furthermore, up until the night of 23 June, many continued to convince themselves and others that Prigozhin was harmless, that he was serving Putin's interests, and that his actions were aligned with the Kremlin's priorities. This seems to have been a form of self-justification and self-reassurance.

### Gathering storm clouds

Over recent weeks, Prigozhin's situation dramatically deteriorated. The trigger for the mutiny appears to have been his forced withdraw from Ukraine – the Ministry of Defence closed the door behind Wagner and insisted that all volunteers sign military contracts. Putin unambiguously supported the army command, even pushing Shoigu to the forefront of the information sphere and publicly praising him (as seen during the president's meeting with the military correspondents). Furthermore, Shoigu was a key speaker during one of the last Security Council [meetings](#). Make no mistake, this is not a sign of Putin's warm sentiment towards Shoigu, but a desire to demonstrate the unity of the power vertical.

During the meeting with military correspondents, Putin explicitly backed the decision to require all volunteers to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence by 1 July. He even said that the initiative was his idea and that it is a necessary step to help restore the legal order. It was understood that members of Wagner would need to sign contracts if they were to return to the war in Ukraine, as we described in our last bulletin. Putin's requirement was obvious: all military units involved in the war in Ukraine must be subordinate to the

General Staff. That was the final nail in the coffin for Wagner in Ukraine. In his 26 June audio [message](#) (Rus) — the first since the mutiny, Prigozhin admitted that the necessity of signing contracts would mean the end of Wagner and that it was the primary reason for organising his “march of justice”.

It remains unclear whether there was a real attack on Wagner's base on 23 June as Prigozhin claimed, but there is no doubt that the army could have exerted additional pressure on Wagner to hasten their exit from Ukraine. There was plenty of bad blood between the two fighting forces at all levels. The heavy-handed actions of the army may have accelerated Prigozhin's extremism, pushing him to act preemptively against the dismantling of Wagner. He could also have been worried that he would be prosecuted once he was stripped of his main asset (while we are not suggesting that this was imminent, Prigozhin understandably felt increasingly vulnerable and insecure). His initial statements on 23 June suggest that he believed Putin, when faced with the rebellion, would be confronted with a difficult decision and would ultimately choose to dispose of Shoigu and support him. Prigozhin could not have miscalculated more spectacularly.

*Prigozhin's rebellion wasn't a bid for power or an attempt to takeover the Kremlin (as Igor Strelkov [suggested](#) (Rus)). It arose from a sense of desperation: he was forced out of Ukraine and found himself unable to maintain Wagner as before, all while the state machinery was turning against him. Prigozhin's objective was to draw Putin's attention and force a discussion about his (and Wagner's) position, looking to extract a defined role, security guarantees and more funding. A source [told](#) (Rus) Meduza that his demands were vague and seemed strange: remove Shoigu, non-interference in Wagner's business, and more funding. These demands were clearly not designed to bring down the government; they were a last-ditch bid to save Wagner as an independent organisation, shaped by a very distorted understanding of political realities and an exaggerated sense of how valuable he was to Putin.*

## Stage 1 — Mounting Escalation

Putin took Prigozhin's mutiny badly. He considered it an attempt to rebel against the state and that it must be ruthlessly and decisively crushed. The Presidential Administration and the *siloviki* also recognised the gravity of the

situation, understanding that there was an actual mutiny that required an immediate, emphatic response. Instead of negotiating, authorities were preparing to physically destroy Wagner with military force.

Regional authorities began to implement counter-terrorism measures, meaning that [responsibility](#) (Rus) was shifted to the FSB and the other security organs illustrating just how seriously the Kremlin was taking the situation. The primary concern at that moment was that Prigozhin's sympathisers might take to the streets in protest. Ultimately none did, but riots [reportedly](#) (Rus) broke out in several prisons (a key Wagner constituency). Later, authorities claimed that these reports had been [heavily exaggerated](#) (Rus) inmates in one Moscow prison had allegedly started knocking on cell bars and shouting in support of Prigozhin, but the situation was never out of control. But amid the atmosphere of shock, it was challenging for the security services to gauge the potential level of popular support for the mutiny.

The first clear sign that the Kremlin would not hesitate to crack down emerged on the evening of 23 June, when the FSB announced the opening of a criminal case in relation to the mutiny. While Prigozhin was not named, some media sources reported that he had been personally charged. For the first time ever, Prigozhin's status was elevated to a federal, official level, with television breaking news detailing the mutiny around midnight. Dmitry Peskov stated that Putin had been informed and was closely monitoring the situation.

Putin's [address](#) to the nation the next morning demonstrated his shock at the unfolding crisis, which he labelled a “criminal adventure” and an “armed mutiny”. In an emotional speech, he said, “any actions that split our nation are essentially a betrayal of our people, of our comrades-in-arms who are now fighting at the frontline. This is a knife in the back of our country and our people.” His address signified a turning point, after which the conflict took on a personal dimension Prigozhin versus Putin. Prigozhin publicly [responded](#) (Rus) to the president, arguing that the president had been mistaken in labelling him a traitor and vowing that he would not surrender to Putin, the FSB or anyone else. That seemed to move the conflict onto a personal level.

The military aspect of the anti-Wagner operation was a debacle that could have resulted in catastrophe. Michael Kofman, senior fellow at Carnegie Russia Eurasia centre, [wrote](#) on Twitter that “Wagner shot down six helicopters and an Il-18 (Il-22) command and control aircraft. Supposedly 13 pilots were killed in

that one day's action. How many Wagner soldiers died in strikes is unclear". Russia's armed forces effectively stood aside to let the mutineers take Rostov-on-Don without a fight, and all measures to halt the lightning thrust towards Moscow, which covered over 800km in 18 hours, failed abysmally. Putin's reluctance to immediately storm facilities housing Wagner group members in Rostov can be explained by a lack of forces, and the fear of causing civilian casualties in contrast to Wagnerites, who behaved calmly and were not violent.

It is unclear if the forces available in Moscow would also have been enough to prevent Wagner from entering the city, even if it is very unlikely they could have established any meaningful control over a target so large. If the mutiny had descended into real fighting, which could have been triggered by an accident or misunderstanding between men on the ground, there is little doubt that the result would have been a disaster with enormous repercussions for Russia's war effort and internal stability.

During the first 24 hours, the authorities needed time to analyse the situation and mobilise a response force, impeded by the fact that most soldiers are currently in Ukraine. Initially, they tried to persuade ordinary Wagner fighters to either surrender or distance themselves from the conflict. Putin dispatched Sergey Surovikin, a long-time ally of Prigozhin, to record a message appealing for the mutineers to lay down their arms and abandon their leader. The Ministry of Defence also issued a warning [statement](#) (Rus). However, there is no indication that this worked in any meaningful way.

At the same time, deputy minister of defence Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and GRU first deputy Vladimir Alekseyev travelled to Rostov to engage in [negotiations](#) (Rus) with Prigozhin. This did not appear to be an attempt to convince Prigozhin to surrender (given Yevkurov's reputation for leniency), but rather to keep open a channel of communication with him in the hope that he could be placated and prevented from doing anything even more radical.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin started to dismantle Wagner's infrastructure in the regions. Accounts on social media (e.g. on platforms such as VK) were blocked and mainstream news outlets published information on Prigozhin's criminal past, hoping to blacken his image and leave no room for rehabilitation. Wagner's regional operations were shut down while security services raided the main centre in St. Petersburg and authorities [took](#) (Rus) it under control. All Prigozhin's Patriot Media Group outlets became inaccessible to users.

The Kremlin also tried to mobilise the political elite. According to a source close to the Presidential Administration, Sergey Kiriyenko called regional governors, asking them to record videos in support of Putin and the state while condemning Prigozhin. Even if he failed to contact every governor, some started to post these videos (see Mikhail Vinogradov's [list](#) (Rus)). Many, on their own initiative or by request, tried to contact Prigozhin and persuade him to surrender. All public statements from his previous allies, such as Ramzan Kadyrov, Sergey Mironov (the leader of A Just Russia – For Truth, who tried to build a close relationship with Prigozhin) and others, unambiguously chose to support Putin.

*At this stage of the mutiny, no-one among the authorities or close to authorities publicly supported Prigozhin. By midday on the 24 June, there was no doubt that both Wagner and Prigozhin would be neutralised militarily: Wagner's presence and legacy was supposed to be dismantled and outlawed. The question was at what cost this would be, how quickly it could be done, and whether it would be possible to avoid serious civilian casualties.*

## ***Stage 2 — Prigozhin's Retreat***

Around 7:00pm on 24 June, the Press Service of the President of Belarus unexpectedly [announced](#) (Rus) that Aleksander Lukashenko, acting on behalf of Putin, had been negotiating with Prigozhin throughout the day and had brokered a deal, ostensibly to prevent any violence. At that moment, Prigozhin's forces were only around 200-300 km from Moscow.

The agreement's details were very unexpected and almost unbelievable. Yevgeny Prigozhin agreed to retreat on the condition that Wagner was given security guarantees. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov informed reporters that according to the deal, fighters who had not participated in the mutiny would sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence, while those who had taken part in the “march for justice” would not face charges – an acknowledgement of their service to Russia in Ukraine. Peskov did not reveal whether any concessions had been made to Prigozhin, other than safety guarantees. Prigozhin had previously demanded that Shoigu and Gerasimov be handed over to him. When asked if there would be personnel changes in the Ministry

of Defence as a result of the deal, Peskov stated, “these matters are solely within the prerogative and competence of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief [Putin], in accordance with the constitution of the Russian Federation. Therefore, it is unlikely that these topics could have been discussed during the aforementioned contacts.”

The “agreement” shocked many. After all, Putin had personally attacked the mutiny mere hours earlier, implying that neither he nor the state would tolerate any such form of open dissent. This stance was presented as a matter of principle, a crucial issue for Russia's survival, which made the notion that Prigozhin could be set free without any consequences unthinkable. On 26 June, Putin addressed the nation to reiterate his position that Prigozhin is a traitor, irrational, and cannot be forgiven. He also reiterated that Prigozhin must depart for Belarus, while Wagner mercenaries were presented with three options: enlist with the army, return home (disarm), or follow Prigozhin to the neighbouring country.

There are several reasons that explain why this initial deal was acceptable to Putin.

- The primary reason was **a strong need to avoid military conflict** in the suburbs of Moscow. A source close to the Kremlin posed several rhetorical questions: “If the rebellion had reached Moscow, would Putin have looked better? Plus, in Rostov there had already been instances of fraternisation with the military. Would Putin have appeared stronger if [Kadyrov's forces](#) (Rus) had started fighting Russians in a Russian city?” Such a situation could have caused significant casualties, including civilians, and could have tarnished the images of Russia, Putin's regime and the state far worse than the eventual agreement did, while also provoking indignation and anger among society.
- **Image has always been of secondary importance to Putin.** If we put optics aside, Putin objectively solved the problem of Wagner and Prigozhin by dissolving the former and expelling the latter. The situation would have been far worse had it ended in a bloody mess on the outskirts of Moscow. It is a mistake to assume that Putin would have tried to crush Prigozhin and Wagner at any cost just to demonstrate his strength, especially if there were alternative solutions available.

- **Putin's personal regard for Prigozhin's past successes** should not be underestimated. Initially, Putin's response to Prigozhin's mutiny was swift and merciless, given the severity of the rebellion, with the intention of dismantling Wagner. However, as it became clear that the upheaval was more the result of a miscalculation rather than an attempt to seize power, it became acceptable for Putin to permit Prigozhin to retreat to Belarus under the stipulation that he ceases all activities in Russia and maintains silence. To better understand this logic, one must examine how Russian media covered the situation after Putin “pardoned” Prigozhin: the main idea was that Prigozhin remains “ours” and that the internal conflict would play in favour of external enemies. That is a major difference between Wagner and Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), with the latter regarded as a tool of external forces.

On the other hand, Prigozhin had even stronger reasons to accept the deal:

- **He was caught off-guard by Putin's reaction** and found himself ill-prepared to become a bona fide revolutionary. He was also unprepared for the possibility of Wagner's forces approaching Moscow, where his only option remained to move in on the Kremlin – an act that would assuredly lead to the annihilation of him and his fighters. He was simultaneously besieged by phone calls from various influential connections, all urging him to surrender. Not a single high-level figure publicly sided with him; quite the opposite, in fact. This likely compounded his sense of looming disaster.
- Therefore, the primary reason for retreat was **the imminent threat of violence, in which Wagner would likely be ruthlessly and inevitably annihilated**. According to *R.Politik's* interpretation, by the afternoon of 24 June, Prigozhin had come to a clear understanding of his impending fate. As *Meduza* reported, by that point, the mercenaries were already nearing the Oka River, the place where the Russian army and the Rosgvardiya had decided to erect the first line of defense against Wagner. Sources close to the Presidential Administration, according to the outlet, claimed that Prigozhin started reaching out to the Kremlin himself around noon on 24 June: “[He] tried to call Putin, but the president wasn't interested in discussing matters with him.”

- Given these circumstances, Putin's proposal was rather generous: security assurances for the Wagner group and a chance for Prigozhin to escape with his life, albeit on the condition that he cease all operations within Russia.

*The proposal to halt the march came directly from Putin and was relayed to Prigozhin through Lukashenko, without any space for negotiations. While we still lack the full details and numerous questions still linger, the deal could have been worse for the president: Prigozhin is supposed to be leaving Russia and Wagner is set to be dismantled with little resistance. During his address on 26 June Putin made it clear that he is letting Prigozhin take his loyal fighters with him, but his hostile tone suggested that the group would not retain its current military functionality and that it would be simply transform into Prigozhin's personal guard. It is unclear how Prigozhin will guarantee that he remains untouched in Belarus — at present it seems that he should simply be satisfied with Putin's word. Regardless, it is crucial to remember that this is not a cast-iron agreement — we're dealing with human intentions expressed in a moment of shock. Therefore, either side may reconsider their commitments at any point in the future, and the confrontation could assume a different form.*

## Wagner's Future

There are several different, contradictory possibilities to consider when mulling Wagner's future. Some suggest Putin may allow Wagner to continue operating, transferring completely to Belarus, but maintaining its functions which in this case might be exclusively tied to foreign missions. This might also involve preserving the heroic reputation of Wagner and Prigozhin in Russia, along with some technical connections with Russian authorities, such as recruitment centres. *Vyorstka* [reported](#) (Rus) that an 8,000 capacity Wagner camp is under construction in Belarus. Wagner centres have simultaneously reopened in St Petersburg, Astrakhan, Voronezh, Tyumen, Novosibirsk and Krasnodar regions.

The fact that Putin officially “pardoned” Wagner and permitted Prigozhin to leave sends very contradictory signals to the elite, members of which are vacillating between two narratives: to denounce Wagner's treachery or to exalt its restraint. On 25 June, chairman of the State Duma defence committee Andrey Kartapolov said that he opposes banning the Wagner Group, calling

such a move “a gift to NATO/Kyiv”. He proposed changing its leadership and keeping those who agreed to abide by new rules. In his words, they “did nothing wrong”, “were just following orders”, and didn't hurt or even offend anyone (conveniently ignoring the pilots killed en route). Kursk governor Roman Starovoit said that he had been “advised” to remove all information about cooperation with Wagner PMC from the regional administration's social media pages, but that he had no intention of doing so. These kinds of reactions indicated that there had been no clear message from the Kremlin on expected attitudes towards Wagner, and there was taboo on supporting the group.

On the other hand, it seems politically challenging for Putin to reconcile the decision to allow Wagner to survive this mutiny. Prigozhin's latest message further confirmed that he continues to harbour political ambitions criticising the way in which the military operation is being conducted, attacking the military top brass, appealing for public support, and exposing the state's vulnerability. In this new message, he did not appear defeated. His activities since the mutiny may seem more dangerous than ever to Putin, given the huge amount of publicity Prigozhin received and the significant social [reaction](#) (Rus) that could follow. It is also a significant blow to the army's interests. State Duma deputy, Lieutenant General Victor Sobolev, said of Wagner's future on 26 June: “We can't just leave an armed group of people, which has already participated in an armed rebellion, at the heels of our troops.”

Wagner's overseas presence may also fall under Kremlin scrutiny, and will most likely be shut down, even if official state institutions struggle to replicate its functions. There is no alternative to Wagner that could operate as efficiently and within the same framework.

*Putin's message on 26 June was more or less clear: Wagner will be dismantled in Russia and Prigozhin's followers will be expelled to Belarus. However, this may prove to be a challenging task: pressuring Wagner mercenaries to sign contracts while others are sent home or expelled from Russia could potentially spark tensions, leaving Prigozhin's role open to someone else in the group seeking widespread support. Putin is currently displaying leniency and a readiness to be 'generous'. However, should Prigozhin hesitate to leave, or if Wagnerites continue to challenge the state, Putin could plausibly adopt a more hardline approach, seeking the total destruction of Wagner via mass repressive measures and criminal prosecution. Whichever decisions Putin makes, they will be*

*divisive and deepen the split between those who sympathise with Prigozhin's stance and those who want him to be stopped.*

## ***Political Consequences***

Prigozhin's mutiny shocked Russia and its elite to the core. The idea that any kind of coup attempt could succeed is conceivable to them only theoretically – let alone a movement originating hundreds of kilometres away in Ukraine managing to nearly reach Moscow within a day to almost no resistance. Society is used to the idea of a strong state, a stable power vertical, and an untouchable autocratic leader. On 24 June, citing a source in Rostov, journalist Dmitry Kolezev [wrote](#) (Rus), “Moscow is inactive, showing a lack of will. The middle and junior officers are sympathetic to Wagner” – this acutely reflected general perceptions that the state could be collapsing.

Prigozhin's mutiny will certainly have a profound political impact with long-term consequences for the regime. We will have to wait for the dust to settle to say definitively, but we have already started to see some significant changes.

There are several important considerations about the possible impact of Prigozhin's mutiny:

- Putin is treating the crisis as a lesson about the strength of the state. On the morning of 24 June, many high-ranking officials and state corporation CEOs fled Moscow (Putin moved out of the city as well). A source close to the government mentioned that lower-level officials were left in total chaos and confusion as they saw anyone who was able to escape do so. The source also pointed out that the Kremlin was shocked by the passive stance of key players. They had been expected to publicly express their support for Putin during such a crisis, but many preferred to keep their distance and wait it out, seeking pretexts to disappear from public space.
- Even though the FSB was concerned about Prigozhin's activities, it was clearly completely blindsided by the mutiny, while American intelligence was seemingly aware of the preparations. Institutional and personnel decisions may be forthcoming.

- The ease with which Prigozhin managed to settle in a strategic city of more than a million people and advance through Russia ("moving for eight hours at the average speed of a bus", [in the words](#) (Rus) of one military blogger) was undoubtedly shocking. In the eyes of Putin and Russia's security services, if Prigozhin had made better practical preparations, with a more serious understanding of his ultimate goals, he would have been a bigger threat to the regime, with disastrous consequences. Putin will have to respond to apparent identified flaws in his apparatus and reinforce the regime.
- Putin may interpret Prigozhin's mutiny as a catalyst for further destabilisation, prompting the regime to constrict further. Depending on how this is done, the system could be shifted closer to a military dictatorship than an autocracy. Aleksander Gabuev, in a conversation with *R.Politik*, termed the event "a vaccine against unrest" – a very handy description of how the regime might use the crisis to create contingency plans ("antibodies") in case anything similar happens in the future.
- Even though Putin managed to regain control, the mutiny has dealt a serious blow to his regime in two ways: Putin's personal responsibility for allowing Prigozhin to rebel, and the fact that Prigozhin managed to negotiate an exit to the crisis where he will not (immediately) be punished. Many within the Russian establishment attribute Prigozhin's behaviour directly to Putin's lack of awareness. Over the last decade, the latter has been allowed to assemble an elite military force, a media empire, recruitment across Russia and a faction of diehard supporters. Many believe that it was Putin himself who allowed this situation to develop, despite numerous warnings and general alarm about the dangerous trajectory Prigozhin was on. It is highly unlikely that anyone in the ruling establishment would dare rise up against him, but silent disappointment in his leadership will grow and several taboos have already been shattered. A common opinion that *R.Politik* heard from its sources in Moscow was that neither the elite nor the general populace would have taken to the streets to protect Putin's regime if Prigozhin had entered the capital. Indeed, in Rostov, popular anger against Wagner was exceedingly limited – a significant proportion of the public interacted with them positively (Prigozhin's car was even cheered when he drove out of the city). With Putin essentially letting off Prigozhin and closing all criminal cases, Russia's president appears weaker and more vulnerable than ever. What began as a mutiny morphed into a circus. Now, Russian social networks are awash with

jokes about the situation, mocking the farcical actions of Putin, the security services, the army, as well as Prigozhin and Shoigu.

- **The siloviki will assume the upper hand.** Despite the fairly widespread [opinion](#) that the current situation was a failure on the part of Russia's security services, it may ultimately work in their favour. The FSB had tried warning the president about Prigozhin's activities; now they have a golden opportunity to claim that they were right all along. The *siloviki* will likely receive additional freedom to crackdown on all Wagner sympathisers, 'angry patriots', and any dissent among the nationalist camp. These voices were previously untouchable because of Putin's reluctance to move against people he regarded as supporters of Russia. Hawks will likely seize the opportunity to push their traditional agenda, claiming that it is necessary to tighten the screws.
- **Prigozhin's retreat and Wagner's end may deepen divisions within society,** increasing the potential for internal civil conflict. A division has formed between two factions: those who fault Russia's leadership for its clumsy handling of the war, miscalculations, indecisiveness and corruption, believing that Prigozhin was basically right (the well-oiled effectiveness of his mutiny also seems stark against the backdrop of abortive, failed military operations against Ukraine), and those who adopt the statist stance – a conviction that the state must be defended, supported and strengthened in the face of any rebellions, regardless of the principles and intentions behind them. While most did not support the mutiny, many sympathised with its aims. For example, the Rybar Telegram channel [lamented](#) (Rus) (along with many others) that the Kremlin had avoided dialogue with Prigozhin and reproached the army command for its indecisiveness. Many observers also discussed the risk of civil war. While there is only a very remote possibility of such a conflict in the foreseeable future, the divide between those who support Putin and those who believe that things should have been done differently has calcified and the chasm will only grow wider. The mutiny gave a brief taste of what it could look like and what the dividing lines might be. However, there is little chance that Prigozhin's downfall will cause some kind of popular response – the idea of rebellion scares ordinary Russians, who are much more concerned about ensuring stability and their own personal safety than about justice and fighting the war.

- The uprising will inevitably have a profound impact on the mindset of the elite. On one hand, Prigozhin was relatively isolated and his downfall is unlikely to drag down many other players. He had no true allies in the establishment, only associates: those who assisted him at Putin's behest (like Anton Vaino), those who often interacted with him (FSO) and those who maintained close working/business relationships with him (like Yuri Kovalchuk — although their paths began to diverge after Prigozhin became involved in the war and subsequently more extremist). He has also been able to form some personal connections, such as with Federal Protective Service personnel (and its former members like Aleksey Dyumin, the governor of Tula region who allegedly also tried to calm Prigozhin down), but these are not heavyweight players. Within the political elite, he has no ideological or political allies and all those who aspired to build a partnership with him, such as A Just Russia — For Truth leader Sergei Mironov, now have to distance themselves from Wagner. All those who displayed respect or sympathy for him will now have to (Rus) either remain silent or condemn him.

Prigozhin's revolt offered a brief, limited window into the nightmare scenario of state collapse. On our Telegram channel, a [straw poll](#) (Rus) showed that 30 percent of respondents believed that “this is a catastrophe, everything is falling apart, I am scared.” The mutiny will likely lead to significant domestic changes because of the regime's show of weakness. According to one military Telegram channel, “The prestige of power has been hit so hard that it will be very difficult to recover without the most radical changes.” However, “radical changes” in question may lay the groundwork for the emergence of new opposition figures — individuals who may dare to challenge the way Russia is fighting in Ukraine and perhaps even take up Prigozhin's cause (albeit at great personal risk).

*The impending end of Wagner satisfies those in power who considered Prigozhin a threat to the state. Prigozhin ultimately drifted into an anti-state position — something that could not be tolerated during wartime. However, a significant number of those outside traditional power structures now lament the loss of a character like Prigozhin, who had begun to garner broad appeal with his effectiveness, straight talk, and audacity. Meanwhile, Russia's elite may pay less heed to Putin, whose reputation was significantly damaged. The president himself may order institutional and personnel reshuffles, hoping to shore*

*up the regime. Prigozhin's mutiny is the biggest challenge to Putin over all 23 years of his rule. It is fair to say that he did not rise to the occasion; instead, all the regime's weaknesses and flaws were laid bare to the public. As for society, Wagner's warm welcome in Rostov demonstrates how appealing with an anti-elite, hardcore nationalist message could resonate with the population — a fact that may also drive the regime in a much darker direction.*

## Africa Peace Plan

### *Initiative Origins*

On 16 and 17 June, leaders of several African nations visited Ukraine and Russia, presenting their plan for the resolution of the conflict. The delegation was composed of: South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who has been most actively promoting mediation in the public arena; President of Zambia, Hakainde Hichilema; President of the Comoros Union, Azali Assoumani, who currently chairs the African Union; Senegalese President Macky Sall; Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly; and special representatives of the presidents of the Republic of Congo and Uganda, Florent Ntsiba and Ruhakana Rugunda.

The initiative was organised by Jean-Yves Ollivier, 78, a French entrepreneur and philanthropist focusing predominantly on the commodities sector in emerging economies. Alongside his commercial pursuits, he engages in parallel diplomacy, leveraging his personal ties with various heads of state to assist in mediation and encourage peaceful resolutions to conflicts on the African continent. *The Financial Times* called Ollivier a “cigar-chomping ‘Kissinger’”, “a veteran commodities trader with homes in several continents and close friends in as many presidential palaces” in a recent [article](#). The outlet draws attention to the fact that Ollivier advised Russia’s nuclear power group Rosatom, considering it the main channel through which he pitched his initiative to the Kremlin.

Ollivier told *The Financial Times*, “all negotiations started somewhere, and he had chosen grain, fertiliser and prisoner exchanges as the basis to open discussions between Moscow and Kyiv.” There is logic in this approach: grain and fertiliser are of paramount importance for Africa, while prisoner exchanges add a humanitarian aspect to the plan and may create the basis for future dialogue when the two sides are finally ready to discuss an end to the conflict. They give additional geopolitical weight to the initiative.

For Ollivier, one of the trickiest aspects of the scheme was how to actually get the mission to Moscow. At first glance, it is intuitive to think that his contacts

with Rosatom could imply a direct or indirect link with influential figures like the Kovalchuk brothers or Kiriienko, who is also head of Rosatom's supervisory board. However, *R.Politik* has found no evidence that the initiative was overseen or promoted by any figure close to Putin, including either one of the Kovalchuks or Kiriienko. A source who is acquainted with the details of the mission said that all contacts with Moscow were official and had gone through the Foreign Ministry. Furthermore, the initiative itself was agreed with Washington, making it an unlikely candidate for a Russian influence operation. According to *The Africa Report*, US secretary of state Anthony Blinken's own team put the French businessman in touch with the Ukrainian leadership. Ollivier visited Washington just after the US Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022 in the company of former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, "an important member of the Brazzaville Foundation who has wide connections in diplomatic circles". There is no reason to believe that the peace talks were initiated by someone in Moscow.

Ollivier visited the Russian capital 10 times between December and May, meeting with Russia's deputy foreign minister, Mikhail Bogdanov. Bogdanov oversees relations with African and Middle Eastern countries and is also Russia's special representative in the Middle East. *The Globe and Mail* wrote that Ivor Ichikowitz, the founder of South African arms company Paramount Group, helped Ollivier to organise the visits to Ukraine and Russia. He is a supporter of the Brazzaville Foundation, a non-profit organisation set up by Ollivier.

Some media outlets also highlighted the fact that in 2020, the Brazzaville Foundation and the Dialogue of Civilisations Research Institute, managed by former head of Russian Railways and Putin's close friend, Vladimir Yakunin, signed a partnership agreement. Moreover, Ollivier participated in the Rhodes Forum, organised by Yakunin's institute, in 2018 and 2019 (Rus). However, these links should not be exaggerated. Ollivier could have been seeking closer commercial ties with the Russian elite at the time, and visiting the forum may have been a way to do this. As for the Dialogue of Civilisations Research Institute, it has all but ceased operations its activities since 2020 and Yakunin has fallen off the radar.

According to R.Politik's understanding of the peace mission, contrary to the rumours, the initiative was not Russian establishment figures' *idea*. Instead, it genuinely appears to have been Ollivier's initiative. The fact that he succeeded in bringing the delegation to Moscow was more the result of Moscow's interest in getting Africa on side so that it could pursue its interests there, not because of Ollivier's personal connections with someone in Putin's circle. A source close to the Kremlin said that the meeting was not considered a failure. The main reason for the meeting, in Moscow's eyes, was not the actual peace initiative but was rather so that Russia could establish closer ties with African countries to counter western narratives and influence. Moreover, it was seen as an additional move that could help make the July Russia-Africa *summit* in St. Petersburg a success.

## Wild Goose Chase For A Grain Deal Truce

The stated reason for the visits to Kyiv and Moscow was to present a peace initiative on behalf of the African continent. On 15 June, a day before the delegation reached Kyiv, *Reuters*, *cited* a draft document which proposed a Russian military pullback, the removal of tactical nuclear weapons from Belarus, the suspension of the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant against Putin, sanctions relief, and an “unconditional” deal on grain and fertilisers. “The above-mentioned measures should aim to facilitate the creation of an environment conducive for a ceasefire, and that will allow the parties to build trust and to consider formulating their peace restoration strategies,” the document said. It was hoped that these could be followed by a ceasefire agreement and parallel contacts between Russia and the West. There is little need to explain how unacceptable these clauses were to Putin.

As such, it is not surprising that later another version of the plan appeared and was outlined in the Ukrainian media. *Kommersant* *summarised* (Rus) its ten points, which were much more abstract, bordering on toothless:

- The conflict must be resolved peacefully;
- Peace talks should commence as soon as possible;
- De-escalation is necessary from both sides;
- Sovereignty of states and nations must be ensured in accordance with the UN Charter;

- Security guarantees are needed for all countries;
- The movement of grains and fertilisers from both countries must be ensured;
- Humanitarian support for those affected must be provided;
- The issue of prisoner exchange and the return of children must be resolved;
- “Post-war recovery” must be ensured;
- Closer interaction with African countries is needed.

Interestingly, the presidents of Egypt and Uganda did not join the delegation. Likely, the Egyptian president did not want to be the “junior player” in Ramaphosa's game, although he still made his participation in the African initiative clear by sending his Prime Minister. The absence of Uganda's president was likely caused by health problems and/or anti-western sentiment among the country's leadership. Mediating countries must be seen as neutral and able to send signals to both sides.

A source with first-hand knowledge of the initiative told *R.Politik* that the goal was not to draft a peace plan or to achieve any progress towards a ceasefire but rather to provide a space for both sides to listen each other. Ukraine wanted the delegation to advocate for grain and fertiliser exports to go ahead – an obvious priority for the African leaders too. So, the fact that both sides then rejected the headline peace proposals should not be considered a failure – they were never seen as particularly important anyway. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stressed after the negotiations that peace talks with Russia could only begin once it had withdrawn its troops from Ukrainian territory. In Zelensky's opinion, negotiations before a troop withdrawal would entail freezing the conflict, while Ukraine needs a “real peace.”

From the Kremlin's point of view, the fact that the talks took place at all was important. The meeting gave more substance to Russia's relations with the African continent, as well as the chance to spread their narrative about the conflict and their views on its causes directly to their target audiences. Putin's agenda was clear: espousing rhetoric centred around Kyiv having to recognise that the annexed territories are Russia's and the West having to get out of Ukraine. Simultaneously, Putin wants to push the idea that it was Russia who

tried to secure a peace deal with Ukraine but Moscow's good intentions were thwarted by Kyiv. During the meeting Putin showed off an initialed draft agreement struck with Ukraine, ostensibly outlined in Istanbul on 29 March (see our [bulletin](#) from the time). The document that Putin showed off was called “The Treaty on Permanent Neutrality and Security Guarantees of Ukraine”, and Kyiv supposedly initialed the agreement, complete with [appendices](#) (Rus) on the armed forces and other matters. He stated that after Russia, in accordance with the agreement, withdrew troops from Kyiv region, Ukraine unexpectedly ended the talks.

It is interesting that the document which Putin displayed at the conference was dated to 15 April; talks in Istanbul concluded on 29 March, the day Russia had to announce its retreat from Kyiv and Chernihiv regions. On 1 April, the first confirmed reports of the Bucha massacre shook the world and it became politically impossible for Moscow to continue playing the “peace card”. The situation only grew worse with the bloody, drawn-out assault on Mariupol. A source close to the Kremlin said that up to the middle of April, Russia and Ukraine were continuing to exchange drafts, but it was already a process driven by inertia rather than a real attempt at finding a compromise. The whole “game” lost any sense once it became unacceptable for Kyiv too and the two sides entrenched their positions.

Now Putin needs to play the “peace talks”

## CONTEXT

### *Smoke And Mirrors*

An important caveat to events in spring last year: while it is true that by the end of March, Russian and Ukrainian delegations had both shifted positions and got closer to some kind of possible “deal”, this was only ever a smokescreen for the Kremlin, not a genuine attempt to stop the war. From the beginning, Putin only greenlit the talks with ulterior motives in mind: to help Moscow better understand Kyiv's intentions and their own room for manoeuvre, as well as to manage practical issues such as humanitarian corridors and prisoner exchanges as the offensive bogged down and it became clear that no quick, easy victory was possible. Peace talks were used to justify Russia's withdrawal from Kyiv and Chernihiv directions, framing them as a ‘goodwill gesture’ so that it did not look like Russia had been defeated militarily and forced to retreat (as was the case).

However, the draft peace deal they were working on was not remotely workable. Russia demanded that Ukraine recognise Luhansk and Donetsk regions as Russian territory, together with Crimea, before a meeting could be arranged with Putin (otherwise nothing could be finalised); Kyiv demanded a deal containing security guarantees and then a meeting with Putin where the two leaders could talk about Ukrainian territory that Russia was trying to claim. None of this had any chance of succeeding and Putin was well aware of that fact.

card once again in order to appeal to the “third world” and the “good West”, showing them that Russia has always been open to negotiations and that it is Ukraine that refuses to participate. The goal is not to start talks but to give arguments to those in the West and other parts of the international community who suggest rethinking support for Ukraine and question the outcome of Kyiv's counter-offensive. It would be incorrect to say that this does not work. American entrepreneur (and old friend of Twitter CEO Elon Musk) David Sacks published an [article](#) on Twitter where he argues that “a peace deal was achievable at the beginning of the war”, referring to the document that Putin showed. He claimed, “it provided that Russia would pull back to pre-war lines if Ukraine would agree not to join NATO (but Ukraine could receive security guarantees from the West).” Elon Musk [commented](#), “well said”, significantly enlarging the reach of these ideas to larger audiences. By 23 June, the article was viewed by 5.4 million people.

A much more important consideration concerning the meeting with the African leaders is the future of the grain deal. Earlier, the Brazzaville Foundation said that the “primary goal” of the African peace mission is to secure agreements which would allow Ukrainian grain and Russian fertiliser to be shipped freely to Africa.

Russia has already shown that it is ready to disrupt the deal: from March, it only agreed to two consecutive 60-day extensions and may let the deal run out on 18 July. From May, Moscow started signalling clearly that the deal would not be extended if Russian demands are not met; the key points of Moscow's position were formulated in a [statement](#) by the Foreign Ministry on 13 April. Since that time, though, the odds of these demands being met have only decreased, especially considering [an explosion](#) on 5 June which destroyed a section of the Togliatti-Odesa ammonia pipeline. Many commentators have argued that Putin does not want to threaten Russia's relationships with developing countries (who will suffer the biggest consequences if the deal is broken and causes higher food prices) and Turkey. The latter is currently one of Moscow's most important partners in the effort to get around western sanctions.

However, the evidence that Moscow may decide to let the deal run out has been growing. The Russian side has seen that threats have not succeeded in softening the West's position and efforts by Ankara and the UN to broker the

loosening (Rus) of sanctions on agriculture have not borne fruit either. According to Russian deputy foreign minister Sergei Vershinin, the EU does not want to connect Rosselkhozbank to SWIFT despite the UN's lobbying.

Putin's rhetoric has shifted as a result, focusing less on the threat of suspending the deal and more trying to give the impression that the deal itself is doomed. During his meeting with the military correspondents, he said that "we were cheated once again", talking about how the West has refused to implement its side of the bargain, complaining that "nothing was done". Putin continued, "Nevertheless, we have extended these agreements several times and I'd like to repeat it again in the interests of friendly countries." He added that only 3 percent of goods shipped under the deal go to the poorest countries.

During the talks with the African peace delegation, Putin highlighted the fact that the supply of Ukrainian grain to global markets will not solve Africa's food problems, giving the impression of someone who is trying to justify an unpopular decision rather than using the opportunity to blackmail the West. Moreover, he noted that grain exports are "the main source of foreign exchange revenue for Ukraine now" the temptation to deprive Ukraine of revenue from its agricultural sector is strong. It is possible that he is considering letting the deal lapse while promising to supply grain to some of the poorest countries for free (a suggestion he first made last Autumn).

*On the surface, Moscow is moving to increase its openness to peace initiatives from 'third countries', hoping to put pressure on the West's united front over Ukraine and give a boost to voices inside the West who argue that instead of supplying Ukraine with more weapons, more should be done to push Kyiv to negotiate with Moscow (read: "stop the counteroffensive"). Simultaneously, Moscow considers it a strategic priority to develop close ties with the African continent, not least to create positive mood music ahead of the Russia-Africa summit in July. However, the risk of Russia tearing up the grain deal are now higher than ever, even if the pill is sweetened slightly by opting for an open-ended interim decision (e.g. a temporary suspension until progress on Russia's demands is made in talks).*

## Putin's Public Signalling

### *Meeting With Military Correspondents*

On 13 June, President Putin held a [meeting](#) in the Kremlin with a group of prominent military correspondents. The published part of the discussion lasted approximately two hours, covering a wide range of pressing issues relating to the war in Ukraine. The dialogue was, in many ways, a concession by Putin the Kremlin felt that it needed to address growing questions about the war's trajectory. As a result, Putin struck a less bullish tone than usual, expressing his concerns about how, in his own words, the correspondents were attempting to “fire up the audience when the TV cameras are on”. Moreover, he was obliged to express himself with more frankness than usual, aware that his audience was experienced and knowledgeable, even if also totally loyal. As such, it is possible derive certain political insights from the talk.

The fact that the discussion took place at all is politically noteworthy, particularly considering the speculation about whether previous meetings took place. There is only official confirmation of one other occasion in which Putin met with military correspondents – a less formal, brief discussion that took place last year on the fringes of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF). Later on, several media outlets, including *Bloomberg*, reported that a second meeting took place in September. However, as previously mentioned, there is no evidence to support this claim, and it remains highly unlikely. For Putin, these types discussions are a serious moral burden; he is forced to answer tough questions and reveal more than he is usually comfortable doing. Therefore, the fact that the recent meeting went ahead at all suggests that Putin is following the advice of his administration and is aware how important such interactions are politically.

The meeting was a closed circle of military correspondents representing Russia's state media, overseen by Aleksey Gromov (the first deputy of Putin's chief of staff). The sole exception was Semen Pegov, founder of the WarGonzo Telegram channel – an outlet that has interviewed Yevgeny Prigozhin on multiple occasions. Notably, no independent bloggers or so-called “angry patriots” were present, meaning that it is still premature to anticipate any kind

of real “dialogue” between Putin and this political faction. Even so, the gathering was a signal to the other war correspondents that they too could potentially join this privileged circle if they play by the rules. With hindsight, considering Prigozhin’s mutiny and its conclusion, the Kremlin may significantly tighten control over the information space, leaving little to no room for independent military correspondents that are not under their control.

According to *R.Politik*’s information, the event was organised by Gromov’s team in a move that exasperated the domestic policy overseers. A source close to Kiriienko’s team claimed that they found the meeting irritating – it was seen as a risky initiative that could potentially make Putin vulnerable by forcing him to provide difficult, unsatisfying answers to some of the questions. The source also reported discussions within the Presidential Administration about potentially reducing Gromov’s responsibilities and transferring control of some media outlets directly to domestic policy overseers. While this may be wishful thinking, it does highlight friction between factions within the Presidential Administration and their differing opinions about how the Kremlin should nurture relations with the more ambitious sections of the patriotic camp.

The meeting also included a private session. On 18 June, weekly current affairs [show](#) (Rus) “Moscow.Kremlin.Putin” on Perviy Kanal (Channel One) revealed that one of the participants had asked Putin to approve the creation of a working group within the Presidential Administration “to coordinate and systematise new ideas concerning special operations in Ukraine”. In other words, to attach the military correspondents to Gromov’s team under the pretext that their suggestions and experience could be used to improve security in the occupied territories.

However, Putin responded with a considerable amount of skepticism, essentially rejecting the idea immediately. He reminded those present that Kiriienko “basically never leaves there [the conflict zone]” (he also then mentioned Marat Khusnullin and Denis Manturov, deputy prime ministers in charge of reconstruction and the arms industry respectively). Putin expressed his concern that it would undermine the army’s efficiency as a fighting force if people from the Presidential Administration interfered with military affairs and disrupted the chain of command. He stressed the importance of having

undivided authority, the subject of his recent efforts to reform the command structure over the war in Ukraine (which caused such problems for Wagner).

The fact that this was revealed on one of the main TV channels is noteworthy. It suggests that Gromov might be pushing for the creation of such a group via the military correspondents, hoping to earn his team an extra administrative tool with which to become more relevant in the military sphere. Unlike Kiriienko, Gromov has ended up less involved in trending political issues caused by the war and so has fewer opportunities to get involved in affairs that are personally important to Putin, such as the day-to-day running of the occupied territories, an important way of demonstrating political significance to Putin in the current situation. Putin, though, instructed the military correspondents to gather information independently themselves and then relay it to a certain person with a direct line of communication to him: “He has a direct line to me. He's got a direct line to me - any second. I go to bed at half past three, he gets off work before me, so he'll get in touch with me any second.” Putin never named this individual but two sources close to the Kremlin said that Putin named Kiriienko, as the main official in charge of the “new territories”.

The meeting, followed several days later by his participation in the SPIEF, was designed to demonstrate that Putin was fully engaged in governing the country and directing the war. As we have previously written, the Presidential Administration sees Putin's aloof demeanour as a PR problem and is trying to rectify it. Various military commentators were prepped in advance to note after the meeting how well-informed Putin was and how skilfully he coped with different information flows, whether about military affairs, social issues or financial challenges in local municipalities. For example, Alexander Khodakovsky, a prominent Telegram blogger and military commander in the Russia-annexed “DNR”, [wrote](#) (Rus) after the meeting that Putin phones brigade commanders in particularly critical situations, and that he had deputed several experienced generals to supervise events at the front and report directly to him. There was only one instance in which Putin admitted to being unaware: this was in regard to the absence of payouts for damaged tanks. He promised to address this with the Ministry of Defence immediately after the meeting.

*There has been a barrage of constant criticism about the way that Moscow has been conducting the war and reacting to internal challenges. Official Russian actions have been coming home to roost, over recent months. Putin's muted response to various military setbacks, including drone attacks, the incursions into Belgorod Region and the essentially unanswered assassinations of key figures in the patriotic camp, has caused a great deal of unease. The meeting was organised by the Kremlin to reassure the so-called "angry patriots" about the president's leadership. Moreover, Putin's performance was intended to show that he remains in touch with military reality, is not in denial about the gravity of the situation (virtually all of the most pressing issues were brought up), and possesses a clear understanding of Russia's military objectives, Russians strategic aims and the means that will be used to ensure them. The Presidential Administration is clearly acutely aware how damaging it would be to be considered out of touch, and is looking to nip it all in the bud rather than wait until it becomes a bigger political problem.*

## ***Putin's Strategic Plan***

During the meeting with the war correspondents on 13 June and later at the St. Petersburg [economic forum](#) (SPIEF) on 16 June, Putin made several statements that provide deeper insight about his views, intentions and plans for the current military situation.

Putin's response to a question about the overall goals of the war suggest that his strategic intentions towards Ukraine and the ultimate objectives of the "military operation" have not changed at all. As he has so often done, he presented an extensive historical overview of how the West "planned" to use Ukraine as a means of destabilising Russia, with "nazis" serving as one of instruments of this "anti-Russia" policy. It is clear that Putin fully believes in this version of events. As such, his key priority is the termination of the "anti-Russia" project in Ukraine by any means necessary, effectively implying regime change in Kyiv. The ongoing war, which has lasted for almost a year and a half and has been marked by repeated failure to get anywhere close to achieving its initial goals, has evidently not altered his resolve.

Instead, everything that has happened has only confirmed the correctness of his opinions and his decision to go to war, even as his actual military options are narrowing. During the meeting with the military correspondents, Putin

revisited this theme, clarifying that Russia's goal was not to “conquer” Ukraine but rather to halt the “anti-Russia” plot of the West, thus confirming yet again that only a pro-Russia Ukraine (which would effectively require surrender or conquest and thorough “cleansing”) would constitute a victory in this war for him. Merely annexing four Ukrainian regions will not be enough for Putin; in his eyes, they are only a secondary, albeit critically important, goal.

The theme of “nazism” was also central to Putin's remarks at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, where he participated in one of the sessions and even introduced a specially prepared report on Bandera's activities in Ukraine, aiming to provoke an emotional response from the audience. This performance was not targeted at western elites but rather was a form of outreach to the “rest” of the world. The display was yet more proof of Putin's intense emotional investment in the “denazification” of Ukraine. The chances of him ever reassessing his final objectives in Ukraine or rethinking his chosen method of resolving the situation are vanishingly slim.

Putin even appeared to take pride in the “fact” that Russia has successfully demilitarised Ukraine. During the SPIEF, he argued that Russia has stripped Ukraine of its arms industry and domestically-produced weapons systems, making the country totally reliant on external sponsors. “You won't live long like that, you won't last,” he stated, revealing his expectation that the West will eventually halt supplies to Kyiv and cause Ukraine to fall to Russian forces.

He reassures himself that the western mainstream will never be prepared to seriously consider Russia's concerns – this door is completely closed now. However, at some point in the future, the “good”, constructive West will inevitably take over again. When asked about the West's supplies of arms to Ukraine, Putin expressed the belief that it is pointless to reproach the West as “they have their own geopolitical goals concerning Russia”, meaning that they wanted to end the system of government there in its current form.

However, he remains convinced that the West will eventually have to change its approach in the long run: “I think the realisation of this [that the West will never achieve its goals] will gradually dawn on them.” He questioned the West's endurance and capacity to supply Kyiv with what it needs to fight, referencing domestic issues and limits to how much ammunition can be produced (a topic Putin spoke on passionately and at some length, indicating that he is closely monitoring the situation there). He also expressed doubts that

Ukraine's leadership would dare launch a further attack after suffering “catastrophic” losses during the current counter-offensive. In other words, Putin believes that Ukraine will ultimately be left to confront Russia alone and will eventually be forced to cease resistance, giving Russia victory and allowing him to implement his geopolitical goals towards the country.

*After several tough moments during the war (namely September-January), Putin appeared much more confident, calm and convinced of his own correctness. He expressed no interest in engaging with western elites or looking to bring them around to Russia's “legitimate” concerns — a task he embarked on with enthusiasm before the war. His remarks during the SPIEF demonstrated a total loss of faith that Russia will be able to do a deal with the current political mainstream in Western countries; instead, he now believes that Russia can only rely on itself. As such, it is clear that Putin has ruled out any sort of dialogue with the West about Ukraine and the war, at least as things currently stand. There is also little likelihood that Putin will consider negotiations with Ukraine or embrace peace proposals from third parties if they do not lead to the end of Kyiv's counter-offensive. His position remains the same as it always has been: in order for the war to stop, the West must cease supporting Ukraine. As such a scenario is very unlikely to happen under current circumstances, there will be no genuine negotiations until something changes.*

## ***Putin's View Of Military Challenges***

Putin does not appear to be phased by either drone strikes on Russian territory (even Moscow) or the raids on Belgorod region. He seems instead to view these attacks as a natural consequence of the current military conflict and a routine issue that can be handled by improving the air defence grid. His opinion contrasts starkly with current public discourse about these attacks. Reading this, it seems as though the Kremlin is losing control and has no real idea how to keep the population safe. Putin does not consider this a destabilising factor but has tried to reassure the public: “It is necessary to carry out corresponding work, detect them [drones] in time, and so on. And this, of course, is being done, and will be done for sure, as far as Moscow and other major centres are concerned, I have no doubts about it whatsoever.”

Later, during the SPIEF, he was even more confident. “There is nothing unusual for us. We will just react calmly,” he said. While this statement was designed to soothe the audience (perhaps with little success), it also signals that the Kremlin will continue to downplay these attacks. It is seen as the most pragmatic option, even if it shows vulnerability. His words are another example of how Putin currently tends to choose pragmatic options that may be harmful to his image over options that could help him project a strongman image but which could come with hefty, unpredictable costs.

During the meeting with military journalists, and later at the SPIEF, Putin warned, “if this continues, we will apparently have to consider the issue — and I say this very carefully — of creating some sort of buffer zone on the territory of Ukraine at a distance from which our territory may not be reached.” The idea of creating a buffer zone surprised many, primarily because Russia does not have the military resources to implement this and would already have taken much more Ukrainian territory if it had the power to do so. Unsurprisingly, this assertion prompted a great deal of speculation.

Some have suggested that Putin was hinting at a new Russian attack on Kharkiv region, which borders Belgorod region and remains under Kyiv's control. On 14 June, analytical Telegram channel Rybar [reported](#) (Rus) that Russia had started concentrating some forces in the direction of Kharkiv. On 18 June, another military blogger, Dimitriev, [suggested](#) (Rus) that Moscow might make another grab for Kharkiv region if Ukraine's counteroffensive fails. Finally, on 22 June during a Security Council [meeting](#), Shoigu openly said that “preparations are in progress for further offensive actions, on our part as well,” an unusual move for Russia's leadership.

According to *R.Politik*'s understanding, Putin's statement was aimed at seeding doubt in Kyiv over whether Moscow was going to intensify its military activities in Kharkiv region if attacks on Belgorod continue. Any attack in the region would require Ukraine to divert resources away from its counteroffensive further south. In other words, Putin is trying to fuel uncertainty in the Ukrainian leadership in order to prevent any more incursions into Belgorod region. Military expert Konrad Musyka told *R.Politik* that “Russians also reportedly launched attacks in Kharkiv and Luhansk Oblasts, but I don't think they can mount anything substantial.”

Putin indicated that he view attacks on regions close to the border with Ukraine as attempts to distract Russia from the main front, trying to force Moscow “to withdraw part of the units from those areas that are considered the most important and critical from the point of view of the possible offensive.” He was quite clear that the Russian army would not fall into this trap. He did acknowledge that they could have been better prepared for attacks on Belgorod region and promised to dopt measures to enhance the efficiency of border security efforts.

On 19 June, State Duma deputy Andrey Gurulyov [stated](#) (Rus) on Telegram that “a decision has been taken to re-establish border troops”. He did not specify what this would actually mean institutionally and no official public decision has been made. The Federal Border Service, established in 1990, was [transferred](#) (Rus) to the Federal Security Service (FSB) by a presidential decree in 2003, enhancing the power of the secret service. There are now serious talks in the Kremlin about whether responsibility for border troops should be shifted to the Ministry of Defence. However, this might not be an easy decision for Putin as it could be interpreted as a blow to the FSB and bears the risk of its leadership appearing politically vulnerable – something that Putin would prefer to avoid. Even if it is not official, Russia's armed forces have already been [working](#) (Rus) with border troops in Belgorod region. If this collaborative effort proves sufficient, Putin might simply drop the proposed reform. Now, that Prigozhin’s mutiny, Putin may be more open to the idea of passing the border troops to the Ministry of Defence, looking to give them more power and redress the failure of the FSB/border troops to stop the Wagner attack.

Another important topic is the potential for a second wave of mobilisation. Putin maintains his previous stance, hoping to avoid this outcome. The last order executed last autumn caused a considerable spike in public anxiety. The president made it clear that there will be no additional mobilisation, highlighting the Ministry of Defence's efforts to recruit contractors. On 2nd June, Colonel General Evgeny Burdinsky, Head of the Main Organisational and Mobilisation Department of the General Staff, [announced](#) (Rus) that this year's main objective is the recruitment of citizens for military service under contract, as well as the fulfilment of the standard of conscription for military service.

According to Putin, “Russia has recruited over 150 thousand contractors since January, reaching a total of 156 thousand when volunteers are included” in

addition to the 300 thousand who were mobilised last year (all of these numbers should be taken with a grain of salt). “Now, people are volunteering willingly,” Putin asserted, arguing that Russia doesn't require a significant regeneration of forces because it does not plan to mount any more large-scale offensives. He also called into question the necessity of attacking Kyiv again.

However, some informed analysts [have cast doubt](#) on whether the recruitment drive really has been so successful. A source close to the Kremlin stated that after the September elections, the Kremlin will inevitably have to initiate a second wave of mobilisation, but this will be done in a discreet manner: people will start receiving e-summonses, staggered over time without any big official announcement, while efforts to get people to sign contracts willingly will continue. The thinking is to present the new wave as a continuation of the first wave – which, in fact, was never officially ended – and as part of the army's natural, routine rotation.

Putin also approved the deployment of conscripts to regions neighbouring Ukraine. Interestingly, he even name-checked General Lapin, who he praised for “fighting with his service weapon alongside his soldiers” (referring to a likely staged video in which Lapin, standing totally exposed in the middle of a road, was seen urging his conscript soldiers onwards towards the sound of gunfire). His real attitude towards this behaviour is difficult to gauge – in this specific case, it seemed ambiguous. However, of note is that Putin evaluated Lapin's efforts enthusiastically in public. These demonstrations, aimed at pleasing the president, work, regardless of their widespread mockery in the information space.

Putin's overall tone showed that he feels pride at the way Russia is coping with the various military challenges. He does not seem particularly concerned about the enormous difficulties remaining, but is clearly deeply convinced about the justice of Russia's cause and cannot see an alternative to the current path.

## *Further Military Measures*

There is no indication, at least from Putin's rhetoric, that Moscow plans to intensify fighting in Ukraine with the aim of conquering additional territory. In response to a question about “shifting” red lines, Putin said that the war itself

was launched as a reaction to the red lines had been violated by the West. He also expressed his surprise that some people did not read the alleged Russian airstrikes on energy infrastructure and the HUR's headquarters in Kyiv as responses to Ukraine violating Moscow's red lines, lowering any expectations of a major escalation on the ground. He reiterated emphatically, “we will not do what these halfwits are doing when they target civilian sites and residential areas. Of course, we will not do this. We will continue to provide selective responses.” The question clearly irritated him, even though he tried to maintain a calm, even-handed approach towards more controversial and challenging topics.

However, Putin did appear worried about the risk of the other side escalating. He fears a spiralling military confrontation in which Russia loses control of the situation and the enemy, be it Ukraine or the collective West, seizes the initiative. Putin said, “everyone is waiting for us to start pushing buttons, provoking us to take tough actions ... but there is no such need.”

## CONTEXT

### *Putin's Statism*

Among several thorny issues which provoked Putin's resentment was a question about unequal payments to servicemen made by the regions. He defended the federal system, saying that Russia is a law-abiding state and that the regions are responsible for deciding how much to pay themselves. A question about difficulties supplying soldiers at the front with modern weapons also triggered an impassioned defense from the president, who began to praise the Russian arms industry and its breakthrough achievements. When one military correspondent refused to drop the topic and persisted in his questions, Putin quickly shut down the discussion, providing a clear example of how he treats negative subjects: firstly, he does not want them raised publicly, and secondly, he prefers to talk about them exclusively with “professionals” rather than with the media or the general public. Importantly, Putin's overall attitude towards the Ministry of Defence was notably warm and positive.

*Despite Putin's calming words, it is important to understand that there is significant potential for Moscow to escalate further. He made this point abundantly clear, implying that western actions rather than Ukrainian attacks would be the trigger for such an escalation. He confirmed that the process of shifting tactical nuclear warheads to Belarus would be complete by the end of the summer. Furthermore, he did not dismiss the possibility of launching strikes on military airfields beyond Ukraine's borders if F-16 fighters deployed there are used in combat operations. There is also the potential for more intense strikes against government buildings in Kyiv. Once again, Putin signalled his desire for the West to*

*disengage from Ukraine. If this disengagement (an unlikely outcome) does not occur, he has shown that he will not hesitate to employ any means at Moscow's disposal, including nuclear weapons, to prevent a Russian defeat.*

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## *Out Of Politics*

In the one of the latest [polls](#) by the Levada Center, most survey respondents expressed a lack of engagement with politics, either due to a perceived inability to influence political outcomes or due to a general lack of interest. Only around a fifth of those surveyed indicated a willingness to become more politically active. The most common reasons cited for non-participation in the political process were a belief that political influence was beyond the reach of ordinary citizens, a lack of understanding about political matters, or preoccupation with daily life. When asked to evaluate their involvement in political processes, the majority cited a lack of interest in or understanding of politics (39 percent, compared to 40 percent in December 2018), or a belief that they couldn't influence political events (25 percent, down from 29 percent in December 2018). Interestingly, 19 percent of respondents, up from 12 percent in December 2018, prioritised the well-being of their local communities.

Young people aged 18-24, individuals with secondary or lower secondary education, and rural residents were more likely to report their disinterest in politics (48 percent, 48 percent and 45 percent respectively). Meanwhile, the perceived inability to impact political events was more frequently voiced by respondents aged 40-54 (28 percent), those with higher education (29 percent), and residents of Moscow (32 percent). Around 22 percent of the respondents expressed a willingness to be more politically active ("definitely yes" 5 percent and "to some extent yes" 17 percent). However, the majority, 78 percent, said that they were not ready to engage more actively in politics. The greatest willingness to participate was observed among young respondents aged 18-24 (32 percent), while the least interest came from the oldest demographic (17 percent). Higher levels of readiness to engage were also reported among those with a higher education (26 percent), residents of Moscow and cities with populations of 100,000-500,000 (25 percent each), and the wealthiest respondents who could afford durable goods (25 percent).

## *Bakhmut And The Russians*

The Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) recently **conducted** a survey regarding Russian attitudes towards the conquest of Bakhmut – an event considered to be one of the war's most significant. Over 80 percent of participants said they were aware of it. Around 57 percent viewed Bakhmut's capture as a strategic achievement that could hasten Russia's victory in the "special military operation". Conversely, 12 percent felt that the costs associated with the seizure of Bakhmut were too high and could potentially impede Russia's prospects. A smaller segment, 10 percent, believed that the capture of Bakhmut was an insignificant victory unlikely to alter the front's dynamics significantly.

When it comes to resources expended on the town's capture, opinions were divided. A quarter of respondents felt that the time, effort and materiel used to take the town were excessive. However, a larger segment, 48 percent, deemed Russia's investments justified.

- ◆ The BBC [reports](#) on Russian casualties in the war against Ukraine.
- ◆ The New York Times [explains](#) how Russia learns from its mistakes over the course of the invasion.
- ◆ Alexei Arbatov, Konstantin Bogdanov and Dmitry Stefanovich, experts at the IMEMO Centre for International Security, [discuss](#) (Rus) the consequences of a possible limited use of nuclear weapons as a response to Sergey Karaganov's notorious [article](#) (Rus).
- ◆ Natalia Zubarevich [provides](#) a snapshot of how the Russian economy is changing under the impact of the “special military operation” and subsequent sanctions.
- ◆ Michael Kofman's [thread](#) on Prigozhin's armed mutiny.
- ◆ Michael Kofman and Nicholas Danforth explain Ukraine's offensive and Russia's localised counterattacks.
- ◆ Vladislav Surkov's [interview](#) (Rus) on Prigozhin's mutiny.

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