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After Weekend of Chaos in Russia, Questions Remain Over Fate of Wagner

With both Putin and Prigozhin silent, Russians and Western officials wonder whether the crisis is truly over

By *Yaroslav Trofimov* [Follow](#)

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A day after Wagner's mutiny showed the unexpected fragility of President Vladimir Putin's regime, all the main players in Russia's worst political crisis in decades stayed out of sight—leaving Russians, and the world, to wonder whether the drama was really over.

Key unanswered questions include the future of Wagner's 25,000 heavily armed troops, of the paramilitary group's owner Yevgeny Prigozhin and of Russia's military leadership, which failed to stop his rapid advance toward Moscow. The details of agreements brokered by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to halt looming bloodshed have yet to be made public.

Following a lengthy public feud with Russia's military leadership, including over the war in Ukraine, Prigozhin was also in danger of losing his power base after a June 10 Russian defense ministry order requiring all private armies to sign government contracts, which would have brought Wagner under formal Russian military control.

The whereabouts of Prigozhin, who according to the Kremlin had agreed to relocate to Belarus, were also unknown on Sunday. His company told a Russian TV network that he "will answer questions when he will have access to proper communications." Flying Russian flags, large Wagner columns on Sunday were driving south on the Moscow-Rostov highway—away from the capital and away from Belarus.

Putin himself made no public appearances and issued no remarks about the conditions under which the rebellion ended.

"The entire world has seen that Russia is on the brink of the most acute political crisis," Sergei Markov, a former Putin adviser and a political analyst in Moscow, said on Telegram Sunday. "Yes, the putsch failed now. But putsches have fundamental reasons. And if the reasons remain, a putsch will happen again. And it could be successful."

One widely shared conclusion in Russia and abroad, however, was that none of the key players in the power struggle—beginning when Prigozhin seized the southern city of Rostov Saturday—has been strengthened by the ordeal that brought the country to the edge of civil war.

Putin, who earlier Saturday demanded his security forces crush what he described as a treasonous mutiny, amnestied Prigozhin and his men by the evening, after Lukashenko stepped in to negotiate a face-saving compromise.

Prigozhin, who showed Wagner's strength by marching two-thirds of the way toward Moscow with little opposition, ended up aborting the rebellion and accepting, at least for now, exile. The Russian army and security forces, meanwhile, displayed little glory as their troops proved reluctant, if not outright afraid, to try stopping Wagner.

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“The entire system has lost yesterday, including Prigozhin, who is also part of the system,” said Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment who was in Moscow on Saturday. As for Putin, he added, “it turned out that the czar is not a real czar because he couldn't control a man from his own system who's supposed to be under his full control.”

As a result, the authority and self-image of the Russian state has sustained lasting damage, likely fueling future challenges to its writ regardless of what happens to Prigozhin. That is especially so as the war in Ukraine, which helped precipitate the Wagner mutiny, continues raging with no end in sight, causing mounting casualties on both sides.

The Ukrainian military is in the midst of a long-planned counteroffensive to oust Kremlin forces in the country's east and south, but has struggled to counter Russian air and artillery superiority. Air raid sirens sounded in the Ukrainian capital Sunday, and the head of the Kyiv City Military Administration urged residents to take shelter. President Biden

and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky spoke by phone about the developments in Russia and “the current situation on the battlefield,” Zelensky said on his website.

“Our country will never be the way it used to be. Wagner’s column didn’t move on the asphalt, it moved through people’s hearts, cutting them in half,” noted Aleksandr Khodakovsky, a veteran of the pro-Russian movement in Ukraine’s Donbas region who is now deputy commander of the Russian National Guard in Donetsk. “Yesterday, everything was hanging on a very thin thread.”

Wagner’s forces Saturday shot down six Russian helicopters and an IL-22 airborne command-center plane, killing 13 airmen, according to Russian military analysts—deaths that will not be easily forgotten, particularly inside the Russian air force, which is commanded by Prigozhin’s onetime ally Gen. Sergei Surovikin. Damage included bridges and roads destroyed by authorities that aimed to stop Wagner’s march and a jet-fuel depot that was hit and burned down in the city of Voronezh.



Wagner owner Yevgeny Prigozhin posed for a selfie with a civilian in Rostov before leaving the city late Saturday. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Some civilians and Wagner troops were also killed as Russian planes dropped bombs on the Moscow-Rostov highway, trying to stop the rebel advance.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Saturday that Wagner troops who didn’t participate in Saturday’s mutiny would be eligible to sign contracts with the ministry of defense. He didn’t say what will happen to the many thousands who did.

On Sunday, Andrey Kartapolov, the head of the Russian parliament’s defense committee and a former deputy minister of defense, had a far more conciliatory message. All Wagner members who wish to do so may sign contracts with the defense ministry, also as entire units, he told Vedomosti newspaper.

Wagner troops who seized the headquarters of the Southern Military District in Rostov on Saturday did nothing wrong, Kartapolov added. “They were following orders,” he said. “They didn’t offend anyone, didn’t break anything. Nobody has even the smallest complaints about them—not the citizens of Rostov, not the service members of the Southern Military District, and not the law-enforcement.”

The fate of Wagner itself has yet to be determined, Kartapolov added, saying that the Russian parliament is working on new legislation to give private military companies legal status. “To disarm and disband them would be the best gift for NATO and the Ukrainians,” he told Vedomosti.

Wagner, as Prigozhin never tired to say, was the only Russian force that managed to advance in Ukraine since last summer, seizing the town of Bakhmut, as regular Russian troops suffered one defeat after another.

Earlier this month, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu signed an order for members of all paramilitary groups to sign regular contracts with the Russian Armed Forces by July 1, something that Prigozhin had vowed Wagner wouldn’t do.

Prigozhin was last seen on Saturday night, as he left the headquarters of the Southern Military District in Rostov to an unknown destination. Disconcertingly for Putin, many locals cheered Wagner’s troops as they withdrew from the city—and jeered the regular police that reappeared on Rostov’s streets after hiding for a day.

In Moscow, too, feelings about Prigozhin were mixed at best on Saturday. “There was a moment of total loss of control. Moscow was already awaiting him, the city froze in expectation that some groups of people would enter,” Kolesnikov said. “And people were not afraid. Putin was afraid of him, but not the country’s population.”

A volatile personality and a former inmate of Soviet prisons, Prigozhin isn’t necessarily the favorite alternative for many Russians, particularly the Moscow elites. That is especially so because Wagner’s ranks include thousands of violent criminals recruited in Russian prison camps.



Smoke filled the sky over the Russian city of Voronezh on Saturday after a fuel depot was hit during Wagner's advance toward Moscow. PHOTO: YEVGENY SUDAKOV/ZUMA PRESS

Yet, the very fact that there was so little spontaneous rallying for the Russian president on Saturday, in Rostov or Moscow, showed the pent-up hunger for change after 23 years of Putin's rule, many Russian analysts noted.

As of Sunday morning, Wagner remained in charge of the Millerovo military airfield in southern Russia, according to Russian reports. It wasn't clear when and how Prigozhin will leave for Belarus, and how many of his men will follow suit.

Fighters loyal to Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, who has had his own feud with Prigozhin, deployed to the outskirts of Moscow and erected roadblocks—once Wagner had turned around its columns.

Shoigu, whose removal was Prigozhin's key demand, appeared in a video Monday for the first time since before the mutiny. Over the weekend, Russian social media had lit up with unconfirmed rumors of his likely replacement in the coming days. The chief of general staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, remained unseen.

"We've seen some very serious cracks emerge," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said about turmoil in Russia in an appearance on ABC Sunday "I doubt we've seen the final act."



A military truck in the Russian city of Rostov, where Wagner troops have now withdrawn. PHOTO: ERIK ROMANENKO/ZUMA PRESS

—*Brett Forrest contributed to this article.*

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