

Wagner Group Mutiny in Russia

June 28, 2023

On Friday, June 23, 2023, Russia's Wagner Group and its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin [launched](#) the most serious threat yet to Russian President Vladimir Putin's rule. The mutiny followed worsening tensions between Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defense (MoD), specifically Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov. Prigozhin [accused](#) the military leadership in a video of fabricating the pretext for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and killing troops unnecessarily—including attacking Wagner units. [Some observers speculate](#) Prigozhin's video and the subsequent escalation was initially an attempt to preempt the [demand](#) that all "volunteer" formations sign contracts with the Russian MoD, effectively ending the Wagner Group's autonomy. Russian authorities issued an arrest warrant for "incitement to [armed rebellion](#)" for Prigozhin shortly after midnight on Saturday, June 24, 2023.

The Wagner Group

The Wagner Group is a quasi-private company that had been under Russian government oversight and played a key role in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The U.S. Departments of State and the Treasury have designated the Wagner Group for sanctions under multiple executive orders. In January 2023, the Biden Administration designated Wagner a Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO). See also CRS In Focus IF12344, *Russia's Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)*, by Andrew S. Bowen, and CRS In Focus IF12389, *Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Alexis Arieff.

By early morning on Saturday, June 24, Prigozhin and his forces had seized control of the headquarters of Russia's Southern Military District in [Rostov-on-Don](#) and [soon pushed toward Moscow](#), reportedly making it to several hundred miles outside the capital. Prigozhin claimed his actions were against not President Putin but the "corrupt" [military leadership](#). President Putin [released an address](#) to the nation on Saturday promising to crush those responsible, but Russian military and security forces appeared unwilling or unable to coordinate an effective response on the ground. Wagner forces [shot down](#) attacking Russian Aerospace Forces fighters and helicopters. On Saturday evening, Prigozhin and the Kremlin announced what they called a "deal" in which the column of advancing Wagner troops [stood down](#) in return for amnesty, with Prigozhin and Wagner fighters reportedly being [allowed to go to Belarus](#).

Russian Intelligence and Security Service Response

It is unclear whether Russian intelligence, specifically the Federal Security Service (FSB), detected the plot or failed to [accurately assess and brief policymakers](#) on the danger. It is possible

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the FSB uncovered the plans and conveyed the situation to Putin, and that he declined to act or did not act for other unknown reasons. This uncertainty notwithstanding, the FSB did not appear prepared for events as they unfolded.

The Russian government's [large, well-staffed security forces](#) appeared surprised by the speed of Wagner's mutiny. Lack of coordination by or orders from the Russian political leadership may have contributed to confusion within security forces. It is also possible the security forces received orders but were debating whether or not to fulfill them, which could indicate only passive support for the regime. It is also possible Prigozhin assessed that the support he anticipated from the lower-level Russian military and security forces did not materialize, prompting him to agree to the "deal."

Potential Issues Facing Congress

Members of Congress now may assess how these latest events alter issues facing Congress including, for example, on matters concerning sanctions, security assistance to Ukraine, stability in Russia, and developments in Belarus. As Members evaluate implications for U.S. interests, they may seek clarification on the following questions:

What Does the Mutiny Mean for Russian Military Forces' Ability to Counter Ukraine's Counteroffensive?

By the end of May 2023, Wagner forces had been [rotated](#) off the frontlines in Ukraine and replaced by Russian military forces. The speed of the Wagner takeover in Rostov may have been attributable, in part, to the Wagner forces' location in the immediate vicinity after being taken off the frontlines, while most Russian forces were deployed on the frontlines. This allowed Wagner forces to seize key objectives before the military could react. It is unclear, however, how the mutiny [may affect](#) the morale, cohesion, and overall command and control of Russian forces. Wagner forces were likely acting as a mobile reserve in Ukraine. Russian forces may be less able to respond to a potential Ukrainian breakthrough without the Wagner Group as a [cohesive force](#).

Did the "Deal" Between Prigozhin and the Kremlin Actually End the Mutiny?

On Saturday, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov [announced](#) a "deal" ending the mutiny. While the deal ended any immediate conflict, it is [unclear whether the underlying issues have been resolved](#). Reports indicate Prigozhin has fled, or was allowed to flee, to Belarus, while both Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov [appear to remain in office](#). The status of Wagner's fighters also remains unclear, with some reports indicating fighters are still [roaming](#) several Russian cities. The deal called for Wagner fighters who did not participate in the mutiny to have the opportunity to sign contracts to serve with the MoD, while those who did participate would not be prosecuted. The Russian military is unlikely to tolerate an autonomous Wagner, and [questions remain](#) over whether the Wagner fighters would submit to Russian military oversight—either through signing contracts with the MoD or other "private" military companies under the control of the MoD.

What Does the Mutiny Mean for Putin's Rule and Stability?

While the long-term implications remain unclear, the mutiny has likely [weakened](#) the image of the regime and Putin's leadership. Some analysts assess that the Russian political and security elite are [frustrated](#) with Putin for not dealing with Prigozhin earlier and for allowing the tension between the Wagner Group and the MoD to grow. The disconnect between the [aggressive tone of Putin's national speech](#) and the apparent blanket amnesty could further contribute to these views. Some observers point out that the deal was better than other possible outcomes, [arguing](#) that increased fighting between the security forces and

Wagner would heighten portrayals of regime weakness. At this time, Putin appears to remain the only politically feasible leadership option for [most of the Russian political and security elite](#), based on Prigozhin's apparent failure to garner sufficient support.

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