

Prigozhin defeated, the Kremlin weakened

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On the evening of June 24, Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that he had ordered the Wagner troops heading to Moscow to turn back, and those occupying strategic facilities in Rostov-on-Don to return to their bases. He justified the decision in terms of the need to prevent the “shedding of Russian blood”, whereupon the mercenaries began to leave Rostov-on-Don. Alyaksandr Lukashenka also apparently made a contribution to resolving the issue: acting in concert and in contact with Vladimir Putin, he put forward a proposal to de-escalate the tensions as well as guarantees of impunity for the Wagner troops. By the time they received the order to return to their bases, the Wagner forces had come within 200 kilometres of Moscow without being seriously impeded in any way. Apart from some aerial shelling of the Wagner columns in the region of Voronezh, there were no reactions from the Russian army or armed services. Prigozhin is estimated to have 25,000 men at his disposal; however, the columns heading to Moscow numbered only around 4000 ‘rebels’ at the most. The local authorities’ measures to slow their advance toward the capital were ineffective: they destroyed roads or set up blockades made of buses and trucks, which were removed without difficulty. In Moscow and Moscow oblast, where an ‘anti-terrorist operation regime’ is in effect, blockades manned by the National Guard appeared on roads leading to the capital, although no regular army troops have been sent into the city. According to unconfirmed reports, the Wagner forces heading to Moscow seized ‘key facilities’ in Voronezh, but Governor Aleksandr Gusev has denied this, while threatening criminal punishments for spreading false information.

Just hours before the announcement that the Wagner troops were to return to their bases, Russian government officials had described Prigozhin as an irresponsible warlord who was seeking to destabilise Russia and acting in the de facto interests of the West and Ukraine. Dmitry Medvedev, the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, said the ‘rebellion’ was a planned operation aimed at seizing power. He did not rule out the possibility that it involved individuals who had previously served in elite units of the Armed Forces, as well as “foreign specialists.” He warned that the rebels could try to take control of nuclear weapons. The foreign ministry warned Western countries against using the internal crisis to achieve their “Russophobic goals”, emphasising that the rebellion was working to the benefit of Russia’s external enemies.

Later in the evening, Putin’s spokesman Dmitri Peskov said that the criminal case against Prigozhin for leading an armed rebellion would be dropped on condition that he went to Belarus (whose ruler Lukashenka is a long-time acquaintance of Prigozhin). Those who fought in the Wagner formations will be housed in field camps, and those willing to do so

will be able to sign a contract with the Russian Armed Forces. Those taking part in the mutiny will not be held criminally responsible.

Commentary

- Prigozhin abandoned the march on Moscow and accepted a series of security guarantees which are unfavourable to him; nevertheless, this situation cannot be considered a success for the Kremlin. The position of President Putin – who only a few hours earlier had declared that the authorities would defend the country against internal treachery, and that the participants in the rebellion would suffer inevitable punishment – has been significantly eroded. In the dictatorial system prevailing in Russia, members of the wider elite will judge his inability to hand down a severe, exemplary punishment to an opponent who has openly challenged the authorities and broken all the formal and informal rules as a sign of weakness. It is irrelevant that the decision not to eliminate the Wagner forces presumably resulted from a fear that this would be a difficult and costly task for the Russian armed forces, in addition to the fact that there were insufficient forces capable of carrying out the task. An internal armed conflict would be dangerous, given the already problematic state of the army's morale, and could negatively affect the situation on the war front in Ukraine. It is likely that on the one hand, these circumstances will lead to personnel reshuffles, and on the other to an intensification of (initially covert) rivalries within the ruling elite.
- The Wagner march confirmed the thesis that the state security system is becoming increasingly weak. The government, the armed forces and the special services did not take any decisive steps to quell the revolt. This may indicate that there is growing scepticism among employees of state structures about the instructions coming from the central authorities. The executors of the orders to liquidate the Wagner forces faced a dilemma: whether to kill fellow Russians, who not long ago had been praised for their valour in the war against Ukraine, or to boycott the Kremlin's orders.
- Everything indicates that in giving the order to march on Moscow, Prigozhin was convinced that a display of force would force the authorities to heed his demands to replace the defence minister and the chief of the General Staff. He also hoped that his desperate step would trigger an internal crisis at the top of the government. It cannot be ruled out that he had information about frictions within the political elite, and felt that his actions would accelerate the disintegration of the Putin regime, and that he would be supported, for example, by some of the leading generals. Prigozhin's gambit failed, however, and he was forced into capitulation by blackmail (probably using the argument that he would be liquidated or deprived of control over the funds he has accumulated). Once he leaves for Belarus, he will lose the position he previously held as a populist military commander who contested government policy and undermined the authority of the armed forces under wartime conditions. His company will probably come under the control of the defence ministry. His further fate remains unclear: it is possible that, with Lukashenko's acquiescence, he will try to continue similar activities from the territory of Belarus, or go to one of the African or Middle Eastern countries where the Wagner Group still operates.