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Wagner's attempted coup flags risks for Russia's strongman

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What exactly is Wagner and how did it rise to the stature of a parallel authority in a country where power is supposed to flow from the top?

A thunderstorm gathered and then dispersed, leaving in its wake a trail of uncertainty and doubt about the soundness of Russia's State structure and the prospects of its grinding war in Ukraine. The shortlived mutiny of the Wagner paramilitary group against Russia's military establishment briefly raised fears of a coup d'etat or civil war, and was mysteriously aborted later through backroom deals. But the dramatic episode revealed a hollowed-out polity which lacks institutional strength and dynamism.



The shortlived mutiny of the Wagner paramilitary group against Russia's military establishment briefly raised fears of a coup d'etat or civil war, and was mysteriously aborted later through backroom deals.(REUTERS)

To understand the revolt, basic questions must be asked. What exactly is Wagner and how did it rise to the stature of a parallel authority in a country where power is supposed to flow from the top and President Vladimir Putin purportedly has an iron grip?

The answer lies in the game of thrones that Putin has orchestrated to remain in power as Russia's longest-serving leader since Joseph Stalin. American political scientist Timothy Frye labels Putin a "weak strongman" who deliberately keeps institutions such as the military, bureaucracy and business community frail and compartmentalised, so that none amasses too much power and he retains ultimate control via personalised relationships.

Staying above the fray as an arbitrator or dealmaker while elites vie for the spoils is not Putin's invention. Authoritarian playbooks worldwide use this ploy. Putin's strategy is a classic manifestation of the art of political survival by keeping the State institutionally fragile and making the country dependent on the leader's individual discretion. His mass popularity also derives from this game where the military, the civil service, private corporations, governors and local administrations are viewed as incompetent and greedy, while he remains the nation's saviour.

Wagner was allowed to become too big for its boots and its chief, Yevgeny Prigozhin, given the freedom to wash the battlefield's dirty linen in public to ensure there was no military coup against Putin and to compensate for mass desertions among regular Russian soldiers suffering from sagging morale in Ukraine. What went wrong with this divide-and-rule strategy was that Prigozhin turned into Frankenstein's monster, and tried to bite the hand that fed him.

In the past, confidants and loyalists who crossed red lines were cut down to size or even eliminated by the Kremlin, which holds a centuries-old tradition of ruthless exercise of power. The Prigozhin saga – where an ex-convict and chef turned into an oligarch and an international warlord – may end up the same way. But more important than the fate of Prigozhin are the high stakes in the Ukraine war and the failures of the Russian military to professionally and effectively execute its goals there. Can Putin achieve battlefield success with a post-Wagner fighting force? The odds are that Russia will lose some, but not all, its occupied territories in Ukraine in the face of the western-backed counter-offensive by the Ukrainians. Defending and holding on to approximately 17% of Ukraine's landmass, not to mention annexing additional Ukrainian land, will get harder for Moscow after the chaos and turmoil of the Wagner affair.

As a former Silovik (member of the Russian State security apparatus) with legendary paranoia about the threats to his regime, Putin will also be wary of further eruptions of disloyalty, including even putsches, from within the fragmented oligarchic Russian establishment. More traitors will be purged. Yet, the shrinking Russian economy (with an estimated Gross Domestic Product below \$2 trillion) and continued losses in Ukraine do not bode well for the business-as-usual mechanisms of the patron-client distribution of plum State resources.

Western powers – which consider Putin an existential challenge to the liberal order in Europe – will not be passive bystanders as Russia's intra-elite machinations worsen. As a private military firm, Wagner's motivating factor to sacrifice tens of thousands of mercenaries and fight relentlessly in Ukraine was money. Expecting western intelligence agencies to not capitalise on Russian disarray and destabilise it using incentives and inducements would be naïve.

Russia is in uncharted waters today. The system that kept the lid on disaffection for so long has developed cracks, and the genie threatens to slip out of the bottle. The chickens of Ukraine's war have come home to roost and no one can confidently place bets on the destiny of a regime struggling with its structural flaws.

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