

Prigozhin RIP, Or Do the Best You Can

by George Friedman - August 29, 2023

Wagner Group boss Yevgeny Prigozhin is dead. He died of a fatal dose of self-confidence. He made three mistakes. First, he thought himself a competent commander. Second, he attempted a coup against a former KGB man who was trained in paranoia. His final mistake was to fail at all that he tried. Arguments over who killed him and how he died are inevitable. Enough time had passed since Prigozhin's failed coup that it seemed reasonable to conclude that Russian President Vladimir Putin had decided to let him live, and strange theories emerged to support this. My favorite was that Prigozhin and Putin had collaborated in staging the coup. The theory never advanced to the point where it explained why Putin would organize a coup against himself, but the obvious answer – that the apparent coup was just a coup – was so boring.

An early theory about Prigozhin's death was that a surface-to-air missile downed his plane. The uncertain origins of this missile could allow Putin to neutralize suspicions that he had organized the killing and, more important, signal that he was still worried about Prigozhin. It is more likely that a bomb was placed on the plane while it was on the tarmac preparing to leave Moscow.

But the missile theory opens the possibility of shifting the blame onto the Americans or Ukrainians. The problem with that theory is that Prigozhin was worth more to them alive than dead. Prigozhin frightened Putin by staging a coup that came within 120 miles (190 kilometers) of Moscow. Prigozhin was Putin's caterer and friend. He was likely at many dinners and other social events where things took place that Putin would rather be forgotten and that Putin's enemies would cherish. His continued existence might cause Russians and others to believe that Putin had lost his resolve at a time when the Russian president couldn't afford to let doubts linger. A living Prigozhin was Putin's nightmare and an American and Ukrainian dream.

There is also the question of why Putin waited so long to kill Prigozhin. I think it was because, in the wake of the coup, questions over Putin's competence and control would have risen. Putin did not want what happened to appear to be a near success. It might have prompted thoughtful men and women to calculate their own odds. Rushing to kill Prigozhin would smell of fear. Letting him run loose (while monitoring his every breath) raised the possibility that Putin somehow authorized or at least wanted a coup, and demonstrated that Putin did not fear him. The long period of waiting minimized the Prigozhin legend and allowed Putin to carefully hold painful discussions with

Prigozhin's former staffers and other fascinating people who might leave their guard down since Prigozhin was still alive.

The final and most interesting question is how and why a former caterer to Putin became head of a paramilitary force. The United States uses private forces like Blackwater, but they are never on the level of Wagner. Nor do they operate under their own power, regardless of how it might seem. American private military companies occupy the lesser jobs. Wagner was a significant military force in its own right – which is very odd for a major power like Russia. The group was used in various lesser conflicts when Russia did not want to send its main force, but after the Ukraine war started, Putin concentrated them in Russia and then in Ukraine.

I think the reason was that Putin did not trust his own general staff. The opening of the war, with tanks massed without consideration of logistics like fuel, deepened his concern. The issue was glaring enough that even after the invasion started, it was possible for Kyiv to believe the attack from the north was merely a diversion, with the main effort coming elsewhere. But the Russian military attacked and was immediately bogged down. The Russian army constantly tried to capture cities of no military importance instead of seeking to break the enemy's forces. The Ukrainians were left with surprising freedom of action.

This early performance forced Putin to make a decision: withdraw, continue with the general staff or bring in the Wagner Group, unconventional but ruthless and better than what he had. This is where Putin made his great mistake. He left the regular army on the battlefield while also deploying Wagner. In effect, he had two armies under different and competing commands. Wagner also went after control of cities, rather than trying to destroy the Ukrainian army as is only proper. Inevitably, the regular army and Wagner competed with one another for missions and supplies. Artillery shells were particularly fought over in increasingly ugly and public disputes, much to the delight of Russia's enemies.

Putin did not appreciate what he had set in motion and did not decisively intervene. It was Prigozhin who went too far, criticizing the general staff and, by implication, Putin. When the Kremlin finally tried to cut him down, Prigozhin moved to eliminate the general staff and take control. The clumsiness of his coup indicates that it would not have solved any problems. The simple fact is that the war had to be fought, according to the Russians, to gain strategic depth. The problem was that the Russian high command had not prepared the army for the war because Putin, an intelligence guy, did not understand the logic of war, lacked or failed to allocate the necessary material, and lacked competent commanders. I have heard a motto: "Never let an intelligence genius run a war." I don't know if Putin is a genius, but he ran the war as if he believed he was. He personally has survived the

chaos and killed the guy who fought in the war, albeit badly.

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