

NATION & WORLD

A week after an armed rebellion rattled Russia, key details about it are still shrouded in mystery

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A week after the mutiny raised the most daunting challenge to President Vladimir Putin's rule in over two decades, key details about the uprising remain shrouded in mystery. Did mercenary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin have inside help from the military and political elite in his armed rebellion that rattled Russia? Uncertainty also swirls around the fate of Prigozhin and his Wagner private military forces, along with the deal they got from the Kremlin, and what the future holds for the Russian defense minister they tried to oust. Finally, the Russian president is seeking to shore up the weaknesses revealed by the events of last weekend — but how successful he will be is another unknown.

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Finally, and perhaps the biggest unknown: Can Putin shore up the weaknesses revealed by the events of last weekend?

DID PRIGOZHIN HAVE INSIDE HELP?

Many observers argue that Prigozhin wouldn't have been able to take over military facilities in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don so easily on June 24 and mount his rapid march toward Moscow without collusion with some members of the military brass.

Thousands of members of his private army drove nearly 1,000 kilometers (about 620 miles) across Russia without facing any serious resistance and shot down at least seven military aircraft, killing at least 10 airmen.

Prigozhin said they got

as close as 200 kilometers (about 125 miles) from Moscow when he ordered them to turn back under a deal brokered by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. That agreement granted amnesty to him and forces from his Wagner Group of private contractors, allowing them to move to Belarus.

Some Kremlin watchers believe senior military officers could have backed his push for the ouster of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and the chief of the General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov. Or they simply decided to wait and see what happened.

"The Wagner mercenary boss was counting on solidarity from senior army officers, and since he came close to reaching Moscow without encountering any particular resistance, he might not have been completely mistaken," analyst Mikhail Komin wrote in a commentary for Carnegie Endowment.

"It's entirely possible that by the start of his 'march for justice,' Prigozhin believed he would find solidarity among many officers in the armed forces, and that if his uprising was successful, they would be joined by certain groups within the ruling elite."

Russian law enforcement agencies might share this belief. Some military bloggers reported that investigators were looking at whether some officers had sided with Prigozhin.

One senior military official, Gen. Sergei Surovikin, who had longtime ties with Prigozhin, is believed to have been detained, two people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press, citing U.S. and Ukrainian intelligence assessments. It's not clear whether Surovikin faces any charges or where he is being held.

Russian military bloggers reported that some border guards were accused of failing to put up resistance to Wagner's convoy as it crossed into Russia from Ukraine, and some pilots also are facing possible charges for refusing to halt the convoy movement toward Moscow.

There was no official confirmation of those claims, however, and it was impossible to verify them.

In noting the lack of a more forceful military response to

the mutiny, some have cited the chaotic and uncertain situation and the Kremlin's doubts about using force in populated areas.

Mark Galeotti, a London-based expert on Russian security affairs, said the government system is "hierarchical and slow," and doesn't encourage initiative.

"In that context, people would just not be willing to act without direct orders, either because they just feared being hanged out to dry if they guessed wrong or else because actually, they had a certain sympathy for Prigozhin," he added.

Pro-Kremlin analyst Sergei Markov said some in the Russian military might have been reluctant to confront Prigozhin initially but their attitude hardened after Wagner forces downed several military helicopters.

A MURKY DEAL AND A MURKY FUTURE

Another mystery is the deal ending the mutiny. Russia's main intelligence agency opened an investigation against Prigozhin for the rebellion, but the case was later dropped as part of that agreement. Putin, Prigozhin and Lukashenko all described it as a compromise intended to avoid bloodshed, but few details have been released.

Also uncertain is the future of Prigozhin and Wagner. Putin said the mercenaries who didn't participate in the mutiny can sign contracts with the Defense Ministry, retire or move to Belarus, but it's unknown how many will join him and whether they will continue to be a single force.

Prigozhin may not feel fully safe under Lukashenko, who is known for his harsh rule and relies on Putin's political and financial support. The mercenary chief's exact whereabouts are unknown. Lukashenko confirmed he is in Belarus; Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov wouldn't say where he is.

Lukashenko can be expected to maintain tight control over Prigozhin's troops.

"I suspect the way Moscow hopes this will play out is the commanders will move to Belarus and then possibly decamp for operations in Africa," said Michael



FILE - Members of the Wagner Group military company guard an area standing in front of a tank in a street in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, Saturday, June 24, 2023. A week after the mutiny raised the most daunting challenge to President Vladimir Putin's rule in over two decades, key details about the uprising remain shrouded in mystery. VASILY DERYUGIN, KOMMERSANT PUBLISHING HOUSE / VIA AP, FILE

Kofman, an expert with the Center for Naval Analyses. "Meanwhile, they will try to get back Wagner's heavy equipment, and then figure out how to use the rank and file that chooses to stay."

Others believe the Kremlin won't allow Prigozhin to operate independently abroad as he did before. Reports from Syria this week indicated that Wagner troops were told to report to the main Russian military base in the country.

Even though Russia closed its criminal inquiry into the mutiny, Putin signaled the authorities will look into Wagner's books for any wrongdoing. That could set the stage for potential charges of financial crime.

In a stunning revelation, Putin declared that the government poured billions of dollars into Wagner, a statement that followed his previous denials of any link between the state and the mercenary group.

"It turns out that Vladimir Putin actually paid for the mutiny with taxpayers' money," analyst Andrei Kolesnikov wrote.

WILL THE DEFENSE MINISTER SURVIVE?

While Prigozhin's stated goal was the ouster of the top military leaders, including the defense minister, some see that Shoigu could emerge strengthened.

"Intriguingly, the main beneficiary seems to be Shoigu: With Prigozhin and Wagner out of the picture, Putin is now immunized against a similar mutiny and any sort of experiences with private military companies," said analyst Tatiana Stanovaya. Shoigu could use the

showdown to get rid of any sign of dissent among the brass, she said.

But Komin, of the Carnegie Endowment, said Prigozhin's mutiny "revealed the scale of the crisis within the Russian armed forces, which are disillusioned by constant failures and tired of war, and within the military and security elites."

It could set the stage for more such tests of authority.

"When senior and mid-ranking officers effectively respond to an armed mutiny with a 'go slow' strike, there can be little doubt that the Wagner boss will not be the last challenger to square off against Shoigu and his allies and seek to capitalize on the unspoken but growing resentment within the Russian armed forces," Komin added.

There also is a debate about the future of military contractors in Russia.

Vladislav Surkov, a former senior aide to Putin, strongly argued that they pose a major threat to Russia's integrity, saying private armies like Wagner could turn Russia into a "Eurasian tribal zone."

WILL PUTIN BE ABLE TO RECOVER FROM THIS?

Even though the quick deal with Prigozhin averted a battle for Moscow that could have plunged the whole country into chaos, the crisis revealed shocking weaknesses in Putin's government.

After a stumbling response to the mutiny, Putin tried to repair the damage to his standing with a series of events aimed at projecting strength and authority. State

television hammered home the message that a quick end to the rebellion made Putin even stronger.

He spoke to army troops and law enforcement officers in a Kremlin ceremony that mimicked the pomp-laden military rites of the Russian empire.

He traveled to the city of Derbent in the mostly Muslim region of Dagestan, on the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha on Wednesday. He walked among cheering crowds, talking to people and shaking hands, and even posed for a photo — extremely rare behavior for a secretive and reserved leader who was notoriously cautious about social contacts during the coronavirus pandemic.

In an apparent bid to turn the page on the rebellion, Putin focused on issues such as the development of tourist industries in Derbent or technological innovations.

But despite such attempts and damage-control efforts by the state propaganda machine, Putin's weakness and vulnerability has become obvious.

"This mutiny was so shocking that the regime appeared to many as near to collapse, which significantly undermines Putin's ability to secure control in the eyes of the political class," Stanovaya said.

But Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Friday rejected claims that the abortive mutiny exposed any weakness, saying that "Russia always has come out stronger from any troubles ... and it will so this time as well."

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NATION & WORLD NEWS | AT A GLANCE

Supreme Court rejects Biden's student loan forgiveness plan

The Supreme Court ruled Friday that the Biden administration had overstepped its authority with its plan to wipe out more than \$400 billion in student debt, dashing the hopes of tens of millions of borrowers and imposing new restrictions on presidential power. More than 45 million people across the country owe \$1.6 trillion in federal loans for college, according to government data, and the proposed debt cancellation, announced by President Joe Biden last summer, would have been one of the most expensive executive actions in U.S. history.

Indiana Supreme Court upholds abortion ban

A ruling by Indiana's highest court Friday cleared the way for a ban in the state on most abortions from conception. The court said that the state constitution guarantees a limited right to abortion, but not a fundamental one — that means allowing abortion only when it is necessary to save a woman's life or protect her from a serious health risk. The court's decision removes the temporary injunction on a near-total ban on abortion that the state's Republican-controlled Legislature passed last August, after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade.

Supreme Court backs web designer opposed to same-sex marriage

The Supreme Court sided Friday with a web designer in Colorado who said she had a First Amendment right to refuse to design wedding websites for same-sex couples despite a state law that forbids discrimination against gay people. Justice Neil Gorsuch, writing for the majority, said that the First Amendment protected the designer, Lorie Smith, from being compelled to express views she opposed. The case, though framed as a clash between free speech and gay rights, was the latest in a series of decisions in favor of religious people and groups, notably conservative Christians.

State Department report on Afghanistan exit urges 'worst case' thinking

The State Department should plan better for worst-case scenarios, strengthen its crisis-management capabilities and ensure that top officials hear "the broadest possible range of views," including ones that challenge their assumptions and

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