

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: The Wagner mercenary group leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin staged a 24-hour mutiny exposing Putin's weaknesses and raising many questions. With us today to shed some light on the situation is our Ukraine and Russia expert Professor Alexander Motyl of Rutgers University. Welcome, Alex. Thanks for joining us today.

AM: Thank you for having me, Vanessa. Thank you for having me, Kathleen. It's a pleasure, as always.

VC: So, let's get right to it, we have a lot to cover in this podcast. Now, can you briefly take us through the timeline of Prigozhin's activities with the Wagner group in what is being called a mutiny or attempted coup?

AM: Well first of all, his forces seized the command-and-control center within the city of Rostov, and then they embarked on a march and/or attack, depending on which you want to call it, on Moscow. There were about 8 – 10,000 soldiers who embarked on this journey. They got to within 120 miles which is not far and then basically called it off. And then the question of course has been what is the intent of the coup, was this a coup attempt, was it simply a manifestation of dissatisfaction, did he have higher political goals in mind? And there is some controversy around that because of course his immediate response, which he issued right after stopping the march, he said "I'm simply trying to make a point that the war is going badly." I'm basically a good guy, I support Russia, I love Russians, I'm unwilling to spill Russian blood, this after having downed seven helicopters, a plane and having killed 21 pilots—that's a little iffy at best. And at the same time Putin issued a statement accusing him of treason, of stabbing Russia in the back and trying to revive the civil war of 1918-1919. And then at the same time negotiations were held with Prigozhin. The president of Belarus, Lukashenko, appears to have played a small role in that. Apparently, the negotiations were led by the Secretary of Russia's Security Council, a man by the name of Patrushev and he appears to have persuaded Prigozhin to stop. To my mind the most credible explanation is that he was expecting, and hoping for more support to appear along the way. There was no opposition, the army didn't oppose him, except for those seven helicopter pilots—but the army didn't oppose him, the air force could have bombed these soldiers to smithereens—they did nothing. The militia basically packed up their bags and ran away; the National Guard did nothing. There are indications that he enjoyed popular support along the way so no one was opposed. Likewise, something like half the security council didn't even express their support of Putin during all this. So clearly there was a lot of tacit support but clearly there wasn't an outpouring of love for Putin. Nor was there an outpouring of love and support for

Prigozhin. And he apparently was hoping that that would occur along the way so that if and when he would reach Moscow, he would be able to prevail without necessarily engaging the country in a massive civil war. It's also been suggested that he lost his nerve. It's also been suggested that the whole thing was just a clever plot pushed through by Putin who was hoping to get rid of his opponents. To my mind that doesn't make any sense. It's like saying that January 6<sup>th</sup> a couple of years ago was a clever plot by Biden. In any case that's where we are at present. I believe it was more than just a march. Along with many Russian analysts, I agree that it was an attempted coup. It showed that Putin is weak it shows that the elites are fractured. One of the significant things about all this is that for the first day or so, Putin was absent. You would think that as soon as this happened, he'd be on television, rallying the forces, speaking to the people. But it basically took him 24 hours or thereabouts to come out with this mealy-mouthed statement. And in the interim much of the heavy lifting was done by this fellow Patrushev, the secretary of the Defense Council which doesn't really make sense. You would think that Putin would be the guy to do something but instead he was apparently, hidden away in his bunker-he's got a whole network of bunkers. But whatever the case this whole affair shows that the Russian regime created by Putin is far weaker than we thought it was, or at least that many people thought it was, far more brittle, that Putin's hold on power is somewhat tenuous and that there is in fact opposition, or at the very least lack of enthusiasm for him in all this, bespeaks a gloomy future for the man.

KK: Well, that's good news. I understand why I was confused. It seems like everything is changing. First, I heard that Prigozhin was exiled to Belarus and just, I think it was this morning he's back in Russia. What is going on?

AM: Exactly. You know, first he accuses him of being a traitor, which he was. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, or the procuracy initiated criminal proceedings which they then dropped. So, here's this guy who's a traitor marching on Moscow, threatening to depose Putin, and then first of all they come up with a deal? What do you do to traitors? You don't negotiate with them.

VC: I mean normally, for an evil dictator such as Putin, in this kind of situation, somebody stages a coup, you know, they execute them. They put them in front of the firing squad, so what's with that response?

AM: That's exactly the case. Remember Putin is a former KGB official so he's got a bucket load of experience in so called web works. He knows how the KGB functions. Anyway, so all this bespeaks some kind of in the very least confusion, more likely than not a weakness on the part of Putin and his people. They somehow defused the situation, weren't sure what to do. In the immediate aftermath of the coup there was some information, some people were tracking flights from Moscow and apparently, they were going to Petersburg,

going to Minsk, going back to Moscow and ostensibly Prigozhin was on one or both of those flights. It wasn't clear where he was. Lukashenko, the president of Belarus, has actually set up a tent camp with 133 tents that accommodate 60 soldiers apiece and so 8,000 Wagner people are supposed to be housed in these tents. I don't think they'll like them. I've seen photographs, they've got these wooden bunk beds. This doesn't seem like the lap of luxury for people who are used to living in something resembling the lap of luxury. And in the meantime, there were rumors that Prigozhin was in Minsk, he was in Moscow, and now apparently, he's in Petersburg. A few days ago, I read a report that some weapons were actually returned to him. In the interim he released an audio tape saying that he expects new victories on the front. He didn't clarify what he meant by "the front." Did he mean the Ukrainian front (VC/KK: Yeah)? That doesn't make sense because the Wagner people have been withdrawn from the front. Did he mean the internal front? Possibly. Anyway, so there's a lot of confusion, but the bottom line is, generally speaking, traitors are arrested and shot. And here's a guy whose kind of traveling around, seemingly mobilizing the troops, and enjoying a certain degree of immunity. Which you could say is because Putin is really, really smart and he's creating this massive deception. But then again, it's too clever by half and to what end? (KK: Yes) Why would he do this? It makes him look stupid at the very best, right? (KK: And weak, obviously). And weak! Alternatively, he really is confused and weak. Which makes a lot of sense given his track record over the last year and a half.

KK: Let me ask you, what happens to the Wagner group if he is no longer, Prigozhin, the head of it? If he's nice, happy in Russia what happens to the group?

VC: Or are they disbanded?

AM: Well, Putin offered them three options. One was throw down your weapons and go home. Which is conceivable, some of them might decide to do that. I suspect they're not going to throw down their weapons, they'll just go home armed. The other possibility is that they sign a contract with the Ministry of Defense and join as individuals the armed forces of the Russian Federation. But that of course was the sticking point all along, that Prigozhin and his people didn't want to do that, they wanted to retain their autonomy. So again, probably some will do that, some have done that but I can't imagine that most will want to, and the third option was to go to Belarus, but again, the tent city is only, the tent camp, rather, consists of 8,000 places. There's a fourth option that Putin didn't mention. That is, they could simply take a flight to the Middle East or in Central Africa where of course the Wagner Group was very much implicated for the last ten years. They've got gold mines; they have all sorts of access to money and Prigozhin has apparently accumulated something like 15 billion dollars (VC wow) so he's doing quite well. So that's a fourth option. The problem is again, if you imagine, as I said, will they go home? It seems unlikely. Will they want to go to Africa? That sounds like a

more or less attractive option, again, given the fact that they've already been there. Will they want to stay in Belarus? That might be the most likely option. They will have uncomfortable lodgings but at the same time if you imagine that Minsk, or wherever it is that they might be located—apparently the tent city is in southwestern Belarus but the distance from that tent city to Moscow is actually closer than from Rostov to Moscow. So, if Prigozhin has funny ideas about an act two, perhaps renewing his assault or retaining his influence, having his people stationed in Belarus isn't necessarily a bad thing. Now it is a bad thing, arguably for Putin, because after all these will be 8,000 guys who are presumably loyal to Prigozhin, presumably disloyal to Putin. But it's especially bad news for Lukashenko, president of Belarus. The last thing this guy needs is a loose cannon with a bunch of crazy, 8,000 potential war criminals in his back yard. So, he's been very careful not to get involved more knowing if he does it will likely be a disaster, he could lose power and so on and so forth. And now he's stuck with 8,000 crazy guys with guns. I find that if I were in his position, I'd be terrified. I'd be doing everything possible to get rid of them, send them off to Africa (VC Laughter). Attack Moscow, but leave me alone.

KK: Right. We have learned that General Surovikin was recently demoted. Can you explain who is he, number one, and why was he demoted?

AM: He is a general who led the Russian troops in Syria and he unleashed this kind of scorched-earth policy of bombardment whereby they destroyed Aleppo and a bunch of other cities. And if I'm not mistaken, he had the moniker of the butcher of Syria or something to that effect. He was brought in to replace one of the many generals who had been charged with the campaign in the second half of last year and was supposed to clean up and engage in a scorched earth policy, that was the expectation, and for a while he pursued it but it didn't work out. He was then demoted and replaced by someone else, by Girasimov, the man who's currently in charge. Apparently, Surovikin, along with another general by the name of Alekseyev and possibly a few more but certainly Surovikin was certainly aware of Prigozhin's planned coup because Prigozhin was planning something for a month or two. This wasn't just a spontaneous act of outrage on his part. You've got to plan the routes and things like that. So, he was apparently aware of this. He apparently gave at the very least his tacit support, possibly his active support, but he was certainly aware and let's call it quasi supportive. So, he too is disloyal. And in the immediate aftermath of the coup, he was brought in for questioning, he was interrogated. He was then let go and now he's under—there's a special Russian term for this—basically he can't talk to anybody there's been a cone of silence placed on him. Clearly this seems to be an indication of the fact that there is disgruntlement within the army and the general staff but as I think I've said on a number of occasions on our former podcasts, there's lots of evidence to support the view that the generals are very upset. They're losing their army. They're losing their armed forces, they're getting battered. been shot. And it would make sense that

they would have some kind of interest in replacing Putin and possibly ending the war or in any case conducting it very differently from the way it's been conducted thus far. So, none of this bodes well for Putin either. There's another complicating factor here, because the Wagner Group apparently had and has very close connections with military intelligence, the so-called GRU. And it has been suggested that the GRU, like Surovikin and a bunch of other generals, must have known and that makes sense because they know everything, they must have known that Prigozhin was planning this affair but did nothing. And of course, it would have been their obligation to do something to dissuade him (KK/VC: Yes, one would think) One would think. And we don't know more than that. But that alone suggests that there are significant elements both within the military intelligence and within the army who are unhappy with Putin, with his regime. With his conduct of the war which suggests, again, that there are significant fissures, cracks within the regime. It's not as strong as Putin claims it is. Which also means that he's in trouble for the immediate and middle term futures because Prigozhin showed and demonstrated that it can be done. And if it weren't for his last-minute decision motivated by who knows what, he would have been in Moscow. It was easy as pie. It's remarkable. It can be done. And you know the Russian elites aren't stupid, they are watching this, they have watched it and they learned, well, he almost pulled it off. Why not try again?

VC: Indeed, and through all of this of course, the world is now seeing the shortcomings, the holes, the chinks in the armor, so to speak in terms of Russia. So, what about other countries? For example, do you think China is now rethinking their relationship with Russia?

AM: We don't know. But as you know, Anthony Blinken visited China recently and appears to have had something resembling fruitful conversations. The Chinese ambassador to the EU a week or two ago said that the Ukrainian war is very different from Taiwan. Taiwan is a part of China and the Donbas and Crimea implicitly or explicitly are not. That's a criticism of Russia's policies. Basically, he's refuting Putin. They've apparently warned Russia against using tactical nuclear weapons. They haven't been delivering weaponry of any kind. They may have been providing some kind of helmets, things like that but they haven't exactly been enthusiastic supporters of the war effort. It would make an enormous amount of sense for them to be worried by what's going on in Russia today. Certainly, the war has both worried them and encouraged them because having a weak Russia is actually in China's interests. That way you can extract, you can coerce them into lowering their prices even further, you can manipulate them. If you're going to have an ally you want the ally to be at your beck and call all the time. So that makes sense. Having a Russia that is in the throes of instability, including the potential breakup of the Russian Federation, that's where the Chinese would draw the line. I should imagine that they are very worried about what's transpired in Russia over the last two weeks. A weak Putin is good but a non-Putin is not necessarily a good thing. And if he were to be replaced by some crazy individual. I don't think

that would make too much of a difference internally within Russia and I don't think it would make too much of a difference with the war but a crazy individual, a Russian hyper nationalist might easily reconsider the Russian alliance with China. Remember Russians and Chinese have historically had lots of bones to pick. Their relations have hardly been smooth over the last several hundred years.

KK: So, do you think that when Putin is threatening – or maybe he has landed drones on the nuclear power station, is that true? Is it a fact that you can't really believe him wholeheartedly as to his threats?

AM: Well, you can't believe anything he says. That's really the bottom line. You can't believe anything that any of them say. They've been lying through their teeth arguably for 23 years and certainly for the last 16 months. I keep reminding people that back in December 2021 and January 2022 leading up to the day before the actual war began, every single Russia analyst, propagandist, policy maker that I read, and we're talking about hundreds insisted that Russia would never, ever, ever attack Ukraine. That went on for a good three months. They denied bombing hospitals, kindergartens, they've denied bombing the Kakhovka Dam. You just can't believe anything these guys say. But that also means that when they threaten to drop nuclear weapons can you believe it? Well, no, you can't. That doesn't mean that they won't or don't intend to but it's simply a case of not being able to believe anything they say, simply not credible. But in terms of the nuclear power plant which by the way, as you know, is Europe's largest, so the consequences of an explosion would be devastating. Not just for Ukraine, but for Europe and of course for Russia. The winds blow south and east in that part of Ukraine which means that the radioactive fallout would affect the occupied territories and Russia proper as much if not more than it would affect Ukraine. Then again, so that would suggest that Putin won't do it because no one could be that crazy except of course we know that Putin and some of his people really are that crazy. So, we can't be certain that they won't. It's not drones that they targeted. What they've done, again, according to Ukrainian intelligence, apparently what they've done is they've placed explosives in a number of places. Now it's unclear that these explosives are placed in a position that would actually destroy the reactors and unleash radioactivity or whether they would simply damage parts of the reactors and thereby enable the Russians to claim, as they've done repeatedly over the last few weeks and months, that it was the Ukrainians who actually shot artillery shells on the nuclear power plant, hoping to blame the Russians for this. Again, that just boggles the mind. One can believe all sorts of things about Zelensky but imagine that Zelensky would want to destroy his own people? (VC Pretty ludicrous.). It just doesn't make any sense. But that said it could make sense from Putin's point of view. Namely, you target the nuclear power plant, stop short of releasing these radioactive clouds and thereby say, "Look, the Ukrainians did this." Now ultimately, he may not care whether the Ukrainians or anybody else or the West believe him. But he does know that people in Russia are likely to believe him. And that of course could serve as a pretext for whatever it is that he might be planning, mobilizing

more soldiers, invading, resisting, who knows. There's been a report that I just saw today, and again it was released by the Ukrainian intelligence service and according to them the likelihood of a Russian attack on the power plant had, quote, significantly been reduced. Now why do they say that, how do they know?? I don't know. All they produced was that announcement.

VC: So how about the Ukraine response to the attempted coup? Tell us about that.

AM: The Ukrainians as a rule are kind of in seventh heaven. They're crowing, they're glowing and basically saying "we told you so, we told you that Putin was weak, we told you there are a lot of fissures, we told you these guys are incompetent and confused," and so on. You know the German term *schadenfreude*, it applies very nicely to this particular case. But it's also considered to be good news, beyond the *schadenfreude* component, it's good news in two senses. One is a divided Russian political leadership means a Russian political leadership that will be incapable or less capable, is the better term, of making decisive decisions, right, I mean for that to happen you need either extremely strong leaders or a united leadership that has a consensual view of things. But if they're not certain if they're fighting each other, if they're engaged in power struggles, if they're planning coups, they may be less inclined to embark on some crazy adventures in Ukraine. By the same token, a divided military leadership, and a military leadership that is also at some odds with the political leadership, in other words, sort of augmenting all these tendencies I just spoke of, means, at least in principle, that the military's capacity to engage in innovative moves on the battlefield and embarking on new strategies will also be harmed at least to some degree. So, in a word, the more confusion within Russia's political ranks and military ranks, the better it is for the Ukrainian military and the better it is for Ukraine in general.

VC: Do you see any parallels between Russia currently under Putin and Germany prior to World War II, the rise of Nazism at that time?

AM: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. This is a point that I've been making for the last 20 years, maybe even more. Actually, I started making this point before Putin arose and the point of comparison was Russia in the 1990s under Yeltsin and Weimar Germany in the 1920s. Both of them were huge empires that lost a lot of territory, they both felt humiliated in the immediate aftermath of their loss, the economy went to pieces, hyper inflation reigned. And, the democrats were in power or at least quasi democrats were in power and what happened in both countries, by the mid 20s and by the end of the 90s was that democracy and liberalism were blamed for all Germany's ills and blamed for all of Russia's ills and at that point the man on horseback appears, Hitler in one case, Putin in the other case, both of them promised to make their countries great again, both of them promised to deal with unemployment, confusion, chaos, re-establish national pride, blah blah blah. The rhetoric is

virtually identical. And they both did the same sort of thing, they dismantled democratic institutions, they killed their political opponents, they jailed people in camps and prisons, they established an ideology of sort of like hyper nationalism, chauvinism and so on, they both created cults of the personality, so the two regimes were very, very identical. And then, if you continue with this analogy, the decision to attack Georgia is sort of similar to attempts to deal with the Sudeten problem in Czechoslovakia, the attack on Ukraine in 2014 is somewhat similar to the attack on Poland in 1939. The attack on Ukraine on 2022 sort of resembles the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. But in both cases, they were motivated by ideology, by the leader's personality, by their sense of greatness. And listen to Putin's rhetoric today, it sounds like Adolf Hitler in many regards.

VC: So, do you think that the Russian people, now, will want to live under this regime for much longer now that all of this is coming out, the world, in fact, is aware of Putin's weakness. Do you think the people are gaining awareness of what's really going on?

AM: It depends on who you ask. According to public opinion polls and most analysts, about 15% of the population is staunchly in Putin's camp. About 15% are in the opposition camp. They hate Putin, they hate the war and so on. Which leaves 70% who are some sort of in the middle. If you look at the public opinion surveys, they basically show that somewhere between 75 and 85% of the population supports Putin and the war. Critics of that say, "what do you expect?" You know, you get a phone call in the middle of the night so to speak, they ask you, do you support the war, well, what are you going to say? Again, if you take the data at face value it suggests there is far more support than there is. If you're skeptical about the data, and listen to some of these Russian analysts who actually converse with people on the ground, they say that most of the people in the middle, that's 70% are kind of tired, bored, uncertain, disgusted, angry, confused, and for want of any better alternative, they say yeah, we support you. Bottom line is they just don't know what they want.

VC: So, we don't know, and who's doing these polls? Who's conducting these polls? (KK: Putin!)

AM: The pollster is a—well, he's got his own service but this, it's a so-called Livada center. They've been around for decades and they're reliable. But that said, they're also working in Putin's Russia so who knows what the pressures are on them but they're generally considered to be reliable. The real problem is, as I said before, is, would you tell the truth to a pollster? If you might suspect that it could get you into trouble, the answer is probably not. And that apparently is a problem that you find the world over. But in answer to your question, would they be willing to opt for some alternatives, you've got to figure several things. The war is not going well. Casualties are extremely high. Ukrainians estimate that the Russians have lost about 230,000 men. Now let's assume that it's exaggerated by a factor of two. It's still 115,000. That's enormous. (VC: Still a lot).



Still an enormous amount, exactly right. That's beginning to affect the Russian population. The economy is not doing well. There's elite fragmentation, there's confusion, there is the Prigozhin coup. Until the coup most Russians didn't know who Prigozhin was because he was always on the Internet, he was on YouTube and most Russians get their information from television which is state-controlled and would never mention Prigozhin. But now, of course, suddenly he's like a household term. And of course, the people who knew Prigozhin best and still know him best are the soldiers because he was speaking ostensibly in their defense, trying to rally them to his side. So, you look at all this and the scenario that Putin painted with his response to the coup, that Prigozhin seems to want to reignite the civil war of 1918-1919 begins to sound very plausible. And that war wasn't just fought by a bunch of soldiers. That involved billions of Russians as well as Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, as well as many others but the point is it involved people and if that happened 100 years ago, why not now?

KK: Well, we were all excited when the coup began and then it fizzled, but we've discussed this before. There's no way to get rid of Putin unless somebody kills him or if he's scared enough and just runs away and disappears like Hitler did. He's too egocentric to kill himself, -- go into those bunkers and disappear.

AM: Well, remember Hitler did in fact kill himself along with Eva Braun, his lover, so that doesn't seem to be Putin's style. So more likely than not he would have to be disposed of in the time-honored tradition of the Russian KGB. Or conceivably he might be persuaded to board a plane for North Korea or China. There is a third possibility. They could try to arrest him and keep him alive. And that would make a lot of sense for the following reason. Everybody knows, including the people who support Putin, that if the war goes badly, as it is going badly, as one of his propagandists said, her name is Marguerite Simonian, she said, "If we lose the war," we—she meant herself and other propagandists— "could find ourselves on the benches of the Hague," the international criminal court (KK: which they could.). If I were in charge of a putsch in Russia, regardless of whether I'm a democrat or crazy nationalist or whatever, I would want Putin to be alive and then I would blame everything on him. That's exactly what I would do. It would be a very convenient way of finding a scapegoat, a fall guy, blame everything on him. And it's conceivable that people in the West would say, "Hey, that sounds pretty convenient." That way Russia is stable, Putin gets the blame, we won the war and everybody's happy. Let's all go home and see what we can do. That's another option but all those of course are premised on whether he's deposed, whether he leaves or whether he's arrested, is premised on another coup attempt. Which again, considering the circumstances that currently exist in Russia is very, very possible if not indeed highly likely. The only thing that would change the dynamic would be some kind of smashing Russian victory in the war. But that seems so unlikely as to be virtually impossible which essentially leaves the only other options that sooner or later, he's going to go.

VC: Yes. The question is, as you have said, the question only is how. How and when. (KK: Exactly)

KK: Well, this has been incredible because you clarified so much, even though it's confusing. Every day we're hearing something new.

VC: Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much. And as we all know; this is an ever-changing situation (AM: It is indeed) but now what you've given us is kind of an understanding of where everything sits right now.

AM: My pleasure. Let's just hope that the next time we meet we can talk about the peace.

KK: Oh God, I hope so. Wouldn't that be wonderful. Absolutely. Thank you, thank you again, Alex.

AM: Thank you Vanessa, thank you Kathleen. My pleasure as always. Bye bye.

END