

Where Does Russia Stand Now?

by George Friedman - June 26, 2023

There has been a great deal of talk that the Wagner Group's attempted insurrection over the weekend may have weakened Russian President Vladimir Putin. If Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin is to be believed, the uprising was months in the making, a result of the conventional military deliberately withholding supplies and, more recently, of a direct Russian missile attack on his troops. This may explain why his march seemed to be directed more at the Russian General Staff than at Putin himself. Whatever the case, the affair was over in a day; either it failed or it was meant to be little more than a gesture. Knowing what happened in this incident will take a long time to sort out.

What we must think through now, though, is to what extent the Prigozhin debacle will destabilize the Russian government, weaken Putin or affect the war in Ukraine. Putin's status is at the center of it all. If this was indeed a coup attempt, it never seriously threatened the Kremlin. Prigozhin's issues with elements of the central government were well known. Why, then, would Putin be weakened by a putsch from a known malcontent that went nowhere? And what does being weakened even mean? Does it mean that department heads, and particularly the General Staff, would disregard his orders? Does it mean he no longer has a job?

In a political sense, weakened might mean that Putin would no longer be able to make executive decisions or eliminate bureaucrats and generals. This would be a serious development. Russia is at war, and it needs an effective command structure. If Putin were weakened, then the command structure would break down, which would also mean there would be no supreme commander. In that scenario, it is unlikely Putin would be weakened; he would be replaced. The question is who would replace him? Prigozhin might have been angling for the job, but he ultimately capitulated to a different Putin puppet, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. Someone unknown to me might emerge, of course, but short of an heir apparent I don't know what it means for Putin to be weakened. And even if I did, I don't know why a coup attempt broken in less than a day should weaken him.

The more serious question concerns what the Wagner Group was doing on the battlefield in the first place. Private military contracting is common enough, but Wagner's role in Russia was fairly unique in that it took on responsibilities usually reserved more for conventional forces than for paramilitary

groups, charged as it was with executing some of the war's most important battles. As its role evolved, Prigozhin began to pursue his own strategy outside the chain of command of the military, sometimes openly ridiculing his rivals, who would cut off his supplies in kind. Two armies thus tried – and have so far failed – to fight a common enemy.

Putin is responsible for the whole affair. He and his cadre thought Russia would quickly and decisively defeat Ukraine. Almost immediately, with the failure of his tank assault, the Russian attack was bogged down. Russia hadn't lost the war, but neither had it won, so he supplemented the army with Wagner. In other words, Putin vastly misunderstood Ukraine's army and his own, and instead of disengaging he threw Wagner into the fray. This strange solution created chaos. From the chaos came the insurrection.

In that sense, putting down a coup attempt isn't the admission of failure that many seem to believe. The failure was creating the situation in which Wagner had to be hired in the first place. The issue now will be the degree to which Moscow is able to review its war plans and locate the massive errors. Putin has avoided having his war plans reviewed. Will a review now happen out of one of the few successes Putin has had?

Some believe the whole incident was a conspiracy. If that were the case, the planning would have to include the president of Belarus, the Russian General staff, members of Putin's staff and so on, as well as a portion of the Wagner Group. No professional conspiracy would ever be executed with so many people aware of what was going on. I wonder how many details Lukashenko might have asked for at some point. Putin, an ex-KGB agent, would know the implausibility of the conspirator's methods. No professional would try a conspiracy with so many people involved.

Author: George Friedman

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