TRANSCRIPT

Online Event
“Prigozhin’s Uprising”

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CSIS EXPERTS

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Max Bergmann:  Good evening, everyone. I’m Max Bergmann. I’m the director of the Europe, Russia, Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Thank you so much for joining us for what is sure to be a fascinating conversation and hopefully will be rather timely.

Over the weekend, of course, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Russian oligarch and head of the Wagner Group, marched his forces on Moscow in an apparent attempt at overthrowing the leadership of the Russian military and Ministry of Defense, or at the very least just putting on a big show of it. Prigozhin’s forces were barreling towards Moscow when it was announced that his mutiny would be called off. Prigozhin would travel to Belarus. There was an apparent deal in the works with the Kremlin. We’ve just had Vladimir Putin take to the airwaves to announce that deal would be respected, but then also announce sort of very threatening words to others who were potentially contemplating similar mutinies. There’s lots to discuss, and I have a great group here with me.

Before I introduce them, let me first say I want everyone to please pick up your phone and you should subscribe to our podcast, The Russian Roulette, where we talk about all these issues, as well as our sister podcast, The Europhile, where we talk a lot about these issues from more of a European lens.

But let me turn to our panelists. First, to my left is Maria Snegovaya, senior fellow here at the Europe, Russia, Eurasia Program. And then Jeff Mankoff, a senior associate with our program here at CSIS, and a distinguished research fellow at the National Defense University. And Catrina Doxsee, associate director and associate fellow with the Transnational Threats Project here at CSIS as well. Thank you all for being here.

I think we first need to just address the major question of what happened. (Laughter.) How do we describe what happened, and maybe sort of a state of play? Maybe, Catrina, I’ll start with you on that. And how would you describe what was Yevgeny Prigozhin thinking? What was the intention? What was the motivation behind what we all witnessed, beginning on Friday night and over the weekend?

Catrina Doxsee:  Yeah. It’s a good question. And I will preface all of this by saying that it’s something that I’m continuing to grapple with, I think everyone is still trying to understand. We still don’t have full information of what has happened, certainly about what’s in the works now, what people are
thinking. But really, I think it comes down to a mix of overconfidence and miscalculation.

Prigozhin is the leader of the Wagner Group which, as everyone knows, is a private military company that is not so private. It’s a quasi-independent company that is closely linked to the Russian government. Russia has long used it – since its formation in 2014 actually in the context of the previous invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has used it to carry out various objectives abroad, typically spreading Moscow’s geopolitical interests, expanding military and intelligence power projection, and securing economic gains. This has been strongest in recent years in places like sub-Saharan Africa – countries like the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali, Madagascar – where Wagner typically exchanges its paramilitary and security services for access to natural resources like gold and gemstones.

With the latest invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Prigozhin brought Wagner in first as more of this paramilitary force, then as almost an informal unit of the Russian military actually serving on the frontlines in the area around Bakhmut. And over the past year, you know, we’ve seen him become more forthcoming that he is, indeed, affiliated with Wagner. They opened a headquarters in Russia. And he’s gotten into spat after spat with those in the Ministry of Defense very publicly.

We believe that Putin has largely allowed this competition between Prigozhin and people like Shoigu and Gerasimov in the Ministry of Defense to go on as a way of sort of playing different sides against one another so that they can all be kept in check without Putin having to come out and outwardly scold any one of them, particularly as Russia navigates a wide range of failures in Ukraine. However, this has escalated over the past month because the Ministry of Defense gave Prigozhin and the Wagner Group a July 1st deadline after which all members of Wagner would have to sign contracts to actually become formal parts of the military, no longer operating in this quasi-independent state. And that, to Prigozhin, read as an existential threat. That was the line he wasn’t willing to cross, he wasn’t willing to risk.

And so under the claimed motivation of responding to a Russian strike on a Wagner camp, something that we still don’t have independent evidence corroborating that it actually happened, we had Prigozhin lead a group of Wagner soldiers toward Moscow. We saw them overtake cities, towns, military headquarter locations as they continued forward.
The deal that was ultimately brokered with Putin involved terms that would allow Prigozhin and those who had participated in this march to remain independent, to not have to sign onto these contracts, and they would go to Belarus. Other members of Wagner would still have the option of signing on with the Ministry of Defense if they wanted to. Also in all of this, Putin came out with incredibly strong language against Prigozhin, comparing the situation to the 1917 revolution, condemning Prigozhin, opening cases against him with the judicial and intelligence system, and then apparently walked that back in what was a relatively lenient set of terms – at least what’s been made public – in this agreement.

That’s been very confusing. It’s yet another of these signs of weakness that we’re seeing from Putin across all of this, combined with the fact that Wagner was able to so easily advance toward Moscow in many cases with photographs and video just showing police officers just standing by and letting them go because they hadn’t been ordered to act against them. This about face from Putin is very confusing.

And to me, at least, it’s clear that this isn’t over. So we have Prigozhin and his core group of Wagner troops that had been in Russia told they can go to Belarus, they won’t be prosecuted, they’ll be excused because of their service in Ukraine. But we also have rumors coming out today that that criminal case against Prigozhin is not actually closed, it’s still open. So Putin’s keeping some leverage. He came out this afternoon with very strong language condemning what had been done, potentially, as you’re saying, to stem any copycats.

But even though the violent situation targeting Moscow had – for now, at least – ended, the battle for control of Wagner has only just begun because, as I mentioned, the core of Wagner’s operations aren’t in Ukraine. In fact, it appears that Prigozhin has been looking for an excuse to draw down his presence in Ukraine as they continue to face failures, tension with the Ministry of Defense, and now the Ukrainian counteroffensive – with the bulk of those operations really being in Africa and other locations where he has built his business empire and which he doesn’t want to give up. He wants to retain control of all that, but because Wagner has been so instrumental in spreading Moscow’s geopolitical interests, in helping them to evade sanctions, blunting the impact by giving them raw goods that they can then bring into unregulated markets to get money in the wake of all of the sanctions levied against them,
Moscow is not going to let all of those companies go without a fight, either.

Mr. Bergmann: Yeah, that’s – thank you. That’s a fantastic overview, and I think we’ll get to kind of the – what this means for Wagner, I think, maybe later in the conversation, but I think you really hit on the point that this is both about business – in terms of for Prigozhin – and power, and his position within sort of the Russian elite.

Maria, maybe let me turn to you. So, I mean, part of me thinks that Prigozhin thought here that he was sort of just doing a protest by sort of marching in, seizing Rostov, but it was a protest that had real consequences, when you had the death of at least 13 Russian pilots that were in six helicopters that were lost – but that he thought he was sort of doing a demonstration. But it’s clear that Putin, in his reaction to it when he came out and did a national address and, as Catrina mentioned, mentions 1917 and treats this as if it’s a coup – that Putin treated it as a coup – what is – do you just think this was sort of Prigozhin got a little, you know, lost common sense as Putin described it in his recent televised address?

Maria Snegovaya: I think there are a lot of moving parts here, and we only – with our limited information that we possess, have constrained understanding of what is actually going on. To the extent that it’s possible of what’s going on, I think Prigozhin has quite consistently, including his message earlier today, presenting this as really this attempt to draw attention of the authorities to this situation that’s going on, and the threat that Wagner found itself being demolished, destroyed by MOD.

Having said that, it’s also not very clear what exactly he was trying to achieve by marching towards Moscow. It’s hard to imagine that would be seen as a very good idea, right – nice idea by Putin and his elites. One of the reasons is this is really the major – probably the largest crisis Putin has ever faced throughout over 23 years of his rule, and indeed so, because the power vertical that Putin has built is based on the assumption that it’s a power vertical, it’s strong, it’s unique, and nobody dares to challenge it. And here you have a military contractor marching across Russia facing zero resistance, and unilaterally inflicting more damage to Russian forces that Ukrainian army – no offense to the Ukrainians and their courage – did maybe in several weeks.

So that is certainly a huge exposure of the weaknesses of Russia, and the big question is right now that most people are discussing is what does it mean for Putin going forward now that we see that the emperor has no
clothes? And everybody is – well, not everybody – Wagner is, to give them credit, is a very strong, very well-prepared, very trained force, but nonetheless – not in a state-level army they can march all the way reaching pretty much 120 miles to Russia’s capital. So certainly the picture is pretty bad.

Mike Kofman posted on Twitter that Prigozhin’s escapade might have been motivated by the sense of weakness that he consciously, subconsciously wanted to exploit, and at least partly he was right about it, right, because indeed he exposed a lot of weaknesses in the system that you can literally unilaterally occupy million-plus city facing zero resistance, the leads will keep quiet, the security will sort of halfway join you, and the society will just have fun, right? You’ve seen a lot of Russians just cheering and having a good time against these armed men of Prigozhinists.

So essentially I agree with Catrina completely. Maybe inadvertently Prigozhin started the chain of the events that are extremely challenging for Putin because he exposed the weakness. He undermined this perception on which Putin regime lasted of this power, vertical strength, and invincibility. They are out in the window, and no wonder Putin is so upset and lashing out at Prigozhin. The question is, is it too late for Putin to really, like, deal with this mess at this point?

Mr. Bergmann: Jeff, over to you. I’m curious what your take is, if you agree with Maria’s assessment here that this really exposes kind of the weakness of the Kremlin. One sort of counter to that might be, well, we’ll sort of see. One the one hand, Prigozhin clearly took advantage of the existing weakness, but then the response may matter quite a bit. And how do you see the kind of current situation playing out?

Jeffrey Mankoff: Yeah, that’s right. So I think it’s important to keep in mind that Prigozhin presented everything that he was doing, going back to his participation in the war in Ukraine, including the Battle for Bakhmut, as being from a place of patriotism for Russia and loyalty to Putin. And so I don’t see his attempted march on Moscow as designed to pose a threat to Putin himself. His targets were the Defense Minister Shoigu, the Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov, and the general way in which the war was being prosecuted.

He’s not a peace candidate, by any stretch of the imagination. If anything, Prigozhin wanted the war to be fought more intensely and more capably, which he saw the current leadership of the Defense Ministry as incapable
of doing. And I think he thought that by making this kind of show of force he could perhaps force Putin’s hand, he could force some kind of accommodation that would seek concessions in terms of the leadership of the military, that would secure Wagner’s continued existence within the Russian political system, avoiding this necessity of having them incorporated into the regular military.

The problem with all of that is Putin didn’t see it that way. And throughout Putin’s 23 years in power, he’s been very intent on preventing any kind of potential challenge from emerging. And I think it’s almost inevitably that he would have seen the collection of forces under the leadership of somebody like Prigozhin as a potential threat. And I think that was part of the reason that Wagner was being starved of resources in the Battle for Bakhmut, which led to a lot of the complaints that Prigozhin was making.

I think that’s why Putin resisted trying to intervene in the conflicts between Shoigu and Gerasimov on the one hand and Prigozhin on the other. And I think it’s part of the reason that Putin ultimately agreed to the proposal by the Defense Ministry that Wagner be formally subordinated to the Defense Ministry, with this July 1st deadline. So in that sense, I think Prigozhin misread what Putin was doing and what Putin’s own threat perception was.

And so, having launched this campaign with the aim of forcing Putin to give some kind of concessions, I think when it became clear that Putin was not going to behave in the way that Prigozhin had hoped, that he actually came out and made a speech denouncing this as treason and a threat to the unity of the state, then Prigozhin wasn’t left with a lot of great options. And so was forced to kind of take the deal that was being offered, which to some degree seems to have been brokered by Aleksandr Lukashenko, the president of Belarus, who played a very anomalous role in all of this.

So in that sense, it looks like this was a defeat for Prigozhin. He is probably going to be, at the very least, isolated in Belarus. Wagner is, if not being completely dissolved and subordinated into the Defense Ministry, at least there seems to be an attempt to try and separate it from Prigozhin’s leadership. And if you look at Putin’s speech from a couple of hours ago, he was very clear to put the onus for all of this on Prigozhin and to talk about the patriotism and the loyalty of the individual Wagnerites, which I think is quite important.
But it’s also not a great look for Putin either, because, as Maria said, if you look at the response of ordinary Russian citizens in Rostov, in Voronezh, and elsewhere to this incursion, or mutiny, or whatever you want to call it, they certainly didn’t seem to oppose it. They didn’t seem to be throwing themselves in front of the tanks to stop them from proceeding on the road towards Moscow. I was having a conversation on Twitter about this last night.

If you compare the reaction of the Russian security services and ordinary Russian people with the way that the Turkish security services and Turkish people responded when there was an attempt to overthrow President Erdogan in 2016, it’s very, very different. Then you had a popular upsurge of support. People actually came out and threw their bodies in front of the military columns and the tanks, at great risk to themselves. And a number of people were killed in the process. You didn’t see anything like that in Russia, even among people who, you know, claim to be supporting the war and believe in the kind of sacredness of Putin himself. So in that sense, I think it’s very damming, as far as what it says about the level of legitimacy and support that Putin enjoys.

Now, we’ll see how he reacts. Certainly he seems to have come down not as hard on Prigozhin and Wagner as perhaps you might have expected. And indeed, the very idea that you can lead an armed mutiny and then go enjoy a comfortable – or, well, an exile in Belarus suggests that Putin didn’t have the capability to do anything more stronger against Prigozhin.

Now, you know, we’ll see how long Prigozhin lasts. We’ll see what happens to him. But certainly, even if that’s the case – even if he does, you know, fall out of a window or have a heart attack or something like that – the fact that it has to be done in the shadows rather than the fact that Putin could come out and demonstratively say, OK, this is unacceptable, you’re going to jail, you’re going to the – whatever is happening to you, is in and of itself a sign of weakness.

And I think now, going forward, obviously, the Kremlin is going to be very intent on preventing other actors from accumulating the kind of military power that Prigozhin accumulated, and there are other entities in Russia now that are forming similar paramilitary forces or private military companies. I’m sure there will be a lot more focus on the potential threat that they pose. But at the same time, having shown up the sort of hollowness of the regime writ large, I think it’s hard not to draw the conclusion that there are going to be other people who are going to seek
to challenge it in various ways – maybe not in a direct military sense the way that Prigozhin did, but in other ways, people whose loyalty is going to be more and more in question. And I think that, in turn, builds up the paranoia within the regime itself, which, as it becomes more and more focused on the threat of internal instability, becomes less effective at actually running the country. And we haven’t even talked about its effectiveness at running the war in Ukraine.

Mr. Bergmann: Yeah, I think that’s a good topic to get to.

But I think – I want to sort of continue with the reaction inside of the Kremlin. I mean, I think your point about the Turkey coup and comparing it to – it sort of highlights why this probably shouldn’t be called a coup. It was much more of a mutiny. Normally in a coup your first effort is to really grab the microphone or the TV – you know, state TV cameras to sort of proclaim that you’re in charge, and Prigozhin didn’t do that. Putin ended up doing that. And it seemed, therefore, sort of like this bizarre maybe kind of January 6th-style – (laughter) – protest, if you want to make a bad analogy, where it didn’t quite seem as though out in terms of what the final objective.

Yet, it clearly caused panic, I would say, in the Kremlin. When you start seeing highways being bulldozed to potentially stop the column and real panic in Moscow and throughout Russia, I mean, do you – was that – Maria, maybe just back to you – did you sense that panic amongst the Kremlin and amongst Russians?

Dr. Snegovaya: Oh, certainly. Well, we didn’t just sense them, right? There was information of private jets flying out of Moscow. And also, it’s the usual indicator, prices of airplane tickets – (laughter) – to Turkey/Armenia, and they all skyrocketed, and the next day there were also a lot of jokes after the – it was all – were about how much people much have spent and how frustrated they must be now. But, yeah, it’s far from over. Maybe not return the ticket just yet, because, as we said, this might be just the beginning of this situation.

I wanted to highlight the interesting quality of the Russian public opinion and the elites that in a lot of ways – and this is why Putin is so upset, probably, about what’s going on – about – in a lot of ways, this is not about commitment to values, real love to Putin – for Putin, et cetera. In a lot of ways, Russian status quo in support of both the elites and the society is based on perception of the stability of the status quo – who has the control, who has power, who is in control, who is the big boss. And
historically, Putin has been very successful in convening this perception, and this is also why FSB, and the security services, the siloviki, go at such paranoid fashion against any possible dissent usually, right, because they want – they want to eliminate any possibility of disagreement and of challenge.

And now this all has been completely destroyed, just like that, without his maybe necessarily having that intent. I’m not – again, I agree with Jeff here; I don’t think that Prigozhin necessarily had that in mind. But that’s certainly the perception that he completely destroyed, and this is why it’s so dangerous. The public, the society, the elites, they have all taken a pause while all this has been unraveling. It’s very – particularly stunning is the silence of Margarita Simonyan, the notorious editor in chief of RT, who just disappeared from Telegram for a couple of days and then resurfaced, saying that, oh, well, sorry guys, something happened; I was away, I’m sorry, on holiday, vacation. (Laughter.)

Mr. Bergmann: Something happened.

Dr. Snegovaya: And I think this is exactly the response that will be happening shall a real challenge emerge to Putin, right? Nobody wants to stand up to his defense. Everybody’s seeing – waiting patiently to see who will emerge as a winner of the situation. In other words, the emperor has no clothes, he has no true support, he has no real elite or society willing to die.

And that may be wrong, because after all Wagner was stopped. Whatever it was that was communicated to Prigozhin, there was something strong enough to make him back down, right? So probably Putin has some siloviki forces on his side. But we’re not sure anymore, right? That’s certainly not what we used to think before. Even Friday last week, right, we probably would be much more confidence about the support and siloviki resource that Putin has at his side. And this is the image that has been destroyed. Essentially, the blood is in the water and all the sharks are up there for all these assets. And there’s a lot of assets to take part.

Mr. Bergmann: Right. Well, essentially, you know, for every elite, their powers depended on Putin. So suddenly if Putin looks weak, they have to be quite concerned. And, Catrina, you brought up the 1917 – you know, Putin mentioned 1917. I was, frankly, shocked when I saw that, because sort of the first lesson of strategic communications – (laughter) – and as a recovering speechwriter – you don’t mention the thing that you’re most worried about. So, you know, it’s like Nixon saying, “I’m not a crook.” (Laughter.)
Ms. Doxsee: Immediately declare that it reminds you of the worst-case scenario that could be happening to you?

Mr. Bergmann: Right, exactly. And it’s, like, if I saw on Twitter making comparisons to 1917, I think initially I would have been like, wow, that’s a little overwrought. But then here is Putin highlighting 1917. And of course, that is when there was a mutiny on the Russian frontlines, you know, the year of revolution which topples the czar and then – (laughs) – you know, eventually leads to a communist revolution.

But the czar being toppled is what you think of in a mutiny on the frontlines when you invoke 1917. Do you think that, you know, part of what we’re seeing here is caused by the situation on the front, where there’s growing concern amongst the either average Russian soldier, but obviously amongst Wagner who is playing a lead role in the fighting of Bakhmut – is this – is this just a Prigozhin power play? Or is there something deeper here that suggests kind of a 1917-style potential collapse?

Ms. Doxsee: I think part of it is definitely that Prigozhin and Wagner broadly has wanted to get off the frontlines. They initially went in and in the early months of their involvement in Ukraine, it was actually very positive for Prigozhin. He was able to get a boost in his reputation, his political power, his relationship with Putin improved. And all of that was because he was able to sort of come in and take the place of some of the confidants in the MOD that had been blamed for those early military failures. He could come in and say: Oh, we’ll come in and assist. And they had some early successes on the frontlines. And Prigozhin really viewed it as a way to boost his own reputation and boost the reputation of Wagner.

However, as they’ve gotten more and more bogged down in places like Bakhmut, and as he’s continued to struggle against the Ministry of Defense, it’s quickly grown to a point where this is no longer advantageous to Prigozhin. And, if anything, it’s distracting from the actual gains that he can make in his broader empire of mercenaries and shell companies, which are outside of the European continent. And so he’s been looking for a way to step back already. This was an opportunity for that, but that’s certainly not how to do it. (Laughter.)

Mr. Bergmann: No, I think – well, it’s – I mean, it’s bureaucratic infighting sort of being made public to the Nth degree.

Ms. Doxsee: Exactly. Well, and I think that’s actually part of what led him to take such extreme measures, thinking that – you know, I don’t think that Prigozhin
thought Putin was going to respond in such strong terms. He didn't think he was going to view it as an attempt on him. He really viewed it as an attempt on the Ministry of Defense. And he thought, I would assume – I can’t really tell you what the man is thinking; I don't know that anyone can at this point. But I believe that he thought this was still certainly beyond the criticisms he had done before. He had an army going forward.

But he thought it was still in the same ballpark of what Putin had been allowing and perhaps even encouraging in recent months, which is this escalating tension between Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defense. The criticisms that Prigozhin was able to bring forward of the way that the military was running operations in Ukraine, things that Putin himself couldn’t say, especially when he’s still trying to manage the narrative that the situation in Ukraine is actually going well, that it’s actually strong. And this was just a bigger version of rebelling against the Ministry of Defense. But he massively miscalculated in terms of how that would be taken.

Mr. Bergmann: So, Jeff, just over to you. I mean, is this a case where Putin just kind of thought he was doing what he normally does, just playing elites off each other, and one decided to do something rather rash, and that the system will sort of trundle on? Or, I think to Maria’s point earlier, is this something where you start to see elites, maybe those that thought the war was kind of ill-advised to begin with, that have seen a lot of their, you know, money and finances sort of strangled a bit by economic sanctions and the decline in the Russian economy, start to think that: You know, what? Maybe Putin’s hold on power is not as strong as we thought.

And if a guy like Prigozhin could – you know, if he just kept going and actually came and took over power, I’d be screwed. And ergo, I need to start to think about a post-Putin plan? Do you think we’re going to start seeing a lot of scheming happening? Or is this now – you know, are people – what do you think will happen now, within the Russian elite?

Dr. Mankoff: Yeah, absolutely. As I mentioned before, I think other people are going to get ideas from this, even if it doesn’t come from the military side, the way that Prigozhin’s challenge came. I think you actually put your finger on it pretty well. There are a lot of people in the Russian elite who are unhappy. Some of them are on the Prigozhin side, who are unhappy because they think the war is being fought incompetently and they want to fight it better. There are others who think that the war was a mistake from the beginning and, for the last year and change, they’ve been forced
to kind of keep their head down because of the climate of repression and fear that’s resulted.

But I think if they perceive that the regime is less secure, less stable than it was last week, then they may seek to challenge it in other ways as well. So I don’t think that we’re at February 1917 yet, but there’s certainly – there’s not only the military mutiny aspect of it, but there’s also what’s happening on the home front. And that was a key element of what happened in February 1917. There were bread strikes in St. Petersburg, or Petrograd, that, you know, the families of the people at the front were involved in. And eventually the people at the front decided, why are we fighting for this when our families are at home and can’t feed themselves?

So I don’t think you’ve seen a breakdown on the home front to that degree yet. The Russian economy is not doing well. Standards of living, especially outside of places like Moscow, are not good. But it hasn’t reached crisis proportions yet. But I do think that what we’re seeing from Prigozhin’s mutiny is that there is dissatisfaction. That dissatisfaction comes from different places on the political spectrum. And because this whole series of events over the last couple of days has shown that maybe the regime doesn’t have the same degree of manual control over the power vertical as perhaps we thought it did, that it’s going to be easier for people to take the initiative and to try and do things.

You know, whether that is to try and topple Putin, which is a big ask, or to at least try and change the dynamics of power within his inner circle in a way that might lead to the war being fought in a different way, or to seek some kind of exit from the war.

Ms. Doxsee: If I could actually add onto that as well, I completely agree. And I think that, you know, as you’re looking at these different political factions within Russia, these different strands of public opinion – including those who were skeptical or critical of the war from the beginning or those who might be growing to doubt it, they not only now are looking broadly at what they are able to see of what’s going on in Ukraine for the war, but in Prigozhin’s message on Saturday he very clearly, sort of point by point, went through and countered Putin’s justification for the war in Ukraine.

Which is a huge blow to Putin, because it’s not just an antiwar advocate coming out and saying this. It’s not just his usual political rivals saying this. This is someone who, up until now, has been a close confidant of Putin’s, someone who has been helping to execute the war, who has secured some of the, I’d say, high profile or even only big successes of the
war in Wagner’s operations. And he’s coming out and saying: OK, I lived it. I was on the inside. And none of this was real. All of this was made up to manipulate you. And that is a huge blow to Putin’s narrative.

Dr. Snegovaya: To that I will add that, first of all, Prigozhin is quite well-known in Russia. There’s not a great many polls, as you can imagine, but Open Minds Institute, a Ukrainian think tank that runs polls in Russia – they’re internet, so they might be a little bit overinflated – shows that 70 to 80 percent of Russians have heard of Prigozhin at least somewhat.

Mr. Bergmann: Now, that’s before this.

Dr. Snegovaya: It was before this. And just one day before Prigozhin’s mutiny, 21 percent of Russians believed that he is capable or somewhat capable of governing Russia, according to their poll, which is still below 73 percent that Putin is enjoying. But then again, it was one day before the mutiny; maybe the numbers have changed. That I wanted to flag. Probably is overinflated, but it’s just to make the point that he is noticeable already at the national scale, which means a lot in Russia’s environment – again, highly controlled media environment where, actually, little outside information penetrates.

Second of all, on who might be the people considering these opportunities that are now opening up in Russia, I wanted to flag the so-called Z-patriots, Strelkov-Girkin among them, right? He’s very active on Telegram, highly popular, represents the beliefs of these hardcore people with true beliefs, unlike most of the Russian society that remains highly neutral or indifferent. This is the group of patriots who feel, first of all, highly unhappy about what’s going on on the frontlines, and at the same time also somewhat humiliated, I’d say, by what we’ve seen this weekend. And Strelkov-Girkin, among others, he openly called for essentially self-organization of this whole situation with Prigozhin happened. He was, like, we can no longer accept the situation. We need to do something. Let’s organize and consider something going forward.

A lot of people are also pointing out the fact that next year is when we have Putin’s election coming, reelection shall we say –

Mr. Bergmann: “Election.”

Dr. Snegovaya: Yes, quote/unquote. And this is, again, something that does not bode well for the stability of the regime.
Mr. Bergmann: Yes, please.

Dr. Mankoff: Yeah. So a couple of points on this.

You know, first of all, I’m glad you brought up Strelkov or Girkin because I think he’s probably, apart from Prigozhin, the most visible face of the kind of pro-war opposition. And in a lot of ways, he’s kind of stayed on the sidelines of some of these things, but he also has this reputation as somebody who’s competent, who’s loyal, who’s patriotic, and I think has a significant following.

And this gets to another issue here that I think is important because, you know, you rightly mentioned the monopoly on communication that the Kremlin enjoys, but it’s not primarily through the state-controlled media that people like Prigozhin or Strelkov have come to the attention of the Russian public. They have their own ability to reach out and pass messages. And they do this on Telegram. They do this by posting videos online.

Dr. Snegovaya: (Inaudible.)

Dr. Mankoff: Yeah. And I think that the Kremlin, because it’s a little bit living in the past perhaps, I think has been caught a little bit unaware by the extent to which people like Girkin and Prigozhin have been able to kind of construct this narrative outside of the formal channels that exist. And I think that’s a danger, too, because I don’t think they understand how this independent kind of social media ecosystem works.

Dr. Snegovaya: And Prigozhin’s escapade shows that it actually matters a lot, right, because Prigozhin was all about social media, these videos that he put out, and they would, again, garner a lot of followers.

Last but not least, I wanted to point out we have been waiting for elite split to happen for a year and a half, and I think finally it happened because Prigozhin, for all his shortcomings, probably is elite, right? We cannot say he’s not an elite member. So here it comes, finally.

Dr. Mankoff: But keep in mind where it’s coming from, right? It’s not the liberal urban elite.

Dr. Snegovaya: It’s certainly not the system liberals.

Dr. Mankoff: It’s not Alexey Navalny that we’re talking about.
Dr. Snegovaya: So the beautiful Russia of the future, not as beautiful as we hoped. (Laughter.)

Mr. Bergmann: So maybe Prigozhin was just online a little too much and in his own sort of ecosystem. But it also speaks to something that Russian hardliners were sort of given space, political space. And while, you know, the – I think – I think you’re on to something there, Jeff, with the Kremlin sort of not really understanding the potential implications of that, they were cracking down – they were cracking – if you, you know, were the other way and advocating against the war from more of a pacifist direction, you would find yourself with a knock on your door.

Do we think now that the space that Russian hardliners have basically been given, I would say, to let off steam, to critique how the war was run but from kind of a more aggressive perspective, that we could see a real crackdown from Putin; that Putin now needs to reestablish himself as in charge of this power vertical, and so that political space even for the right is now going to be – is going to be limited? Jeff, do you think that we’re going to see a real crackdown in the – in the days, weeks, months ahead?

Dr. Mankoff: Yeah, I would imagine that that’s the case. I mean, I think probably this recognition about the ability of the far right to organize outside of official channels is coming in reaction to the events that we’ve seen over the last couple of days.

Let me just add one other thing, though. I think part of the reason that they have allowed the far right to act in this way for the last year-plus is because they’re actually concerned about the political ambitions of the military. And this is a long-running concern in Russia. You know, when the military gets too powerful, as it tends to do during wartime, it becomes a danger to political stability, and there’s always been this kind of mistrust of strong military leaders, I mean, if you think about people like Zhukov during World War II who kind of need to be cut down a peg when their ambitions get a little bit too large. And so in some ways I think the toleration of people like Prigozhin was precisely because there were concerns in the leadership about the military getting too big for its britches if it didn’t have this kind of rival power to contain it and keep it in check. And now, if they’re going to crack down on the far right this way, then they have to do something else in order to make sure that the military doesn’t start growing out of hand.
Mr. Bergmann: I think that’s maybe a good segue to talk about what this will mean for the Russian military and what this will mean for maybe the war in Ukraine. Catrina, how do you see this playing out? I mean, I think if I were Ukrainian I would probably not want to see a change in the – (laughs) – in Gerasimov and the leadership of the Russian General Staff, or Shoigu. Do you anticipate a change and Putin making a change there? Or what do you think the impacts will be on Russia’s, you know, ability to wage this war going forward?

Ms. Doxsee: Yeah. I think that at least immediately we’re unlikely to see a personnel change there just because that would look like yet another level of weakness. You had Prigozhin just really targeting the two of them this whole time, calling for them to step down, and so then if right after accepting the terms of what – at least based on what is made public – is an extremely gentle agreement to stop that march toward Moscow, if then Putin is seen as capitulating to Prigozhin’s demands immediately afterward, I think that’s a step too far.

I could see kind of in the longer term, particularly as we see the Ukrainian counteroffensive continue, as we see what happens especially if Wagner troops are either leaving the front or falling under new command, I could see Putin using failures there or setbacks as an excuse to then change out leadership and likely go through the song and dance of, you know, thank you for your great service during the operation, and bring someone else in. But I don’t think he can possibly do it when it looks like it was based on Prigozhin’s demands.

Mr. Bergmann: And I’m – you know, part of me now thinks that the potential for if Ukraine can make, you know, real territorial gains, at which point, you know, thus far in the counteroffensive they haven’t made the kind of gains that I think many of us wish they had been making. But if they are able to make sizeable territorial gains, it seems to raise the stakes even higher for Putin and the Kremlin that it’s another point of weakness.

And you know, Putin was – just gave another national address where he sort of described the war as existential. Jeff, do you see this now as sort of an existential war for Putin, and that if the counteroffensive goes really badly for Russia that he would be in real trouble and put even more sort of gasoline on the current fire?

Dr. Mankoff: Well, yes and no. I think from the beginning this war has been existential for Putin, which is different from it being existential for Russia. I think
Russia can decide to pull its troops out of Ukraine and live within its internationally recognized borders and be perfectly fine. The problem, I think, is that Putin has staked so much of his own reputation, his own legacy on this war and has described the war in such apocalyptic terms that politically I don’t see how he can back down from it. So I am – I do think that if the Ukrainian counteroffensive – either this one or if the war continues going on – if ultimately it looks like the war is beginning to tilt pretty substantially in the Ukrainian direction, that does pose a significant threat to Putin.

As far as pouring further gasoline on the fire, you know, I’m a little bit agnostic about that because I think that we’ve seen already things like the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka Dam, targeting of civilians, you know, mass murder in occupied cities – I mean, in a lot of ways, the Russians have already poured a lot of gasoline on the fire, and short of, you know, conducting strikes on NATO territory, which I think is extremely unlikely, or escalation to the use of tactical nuclear weapons, which I think is also extremely unlikely, there is not a whole lot more they can do. I mean, I think we can see more of these attacks on civilian infrastructure, more attempts to, you know, impose suffering on innocent civilians, but we’ve already seen that to a pretty substantial degree. So I do think it’s likely that we would see more of that; that this is going to continue to be an ugly, dirty war with a lot of collateral damage. But in terms of the kind of really apocalyptic scenarios that I think you’ve sort of implied in your question, I think those are less likely.

Mr. Bergmann: Yeah, it’s sort of Prigozhin – despite all the complaints and, you know, wanting more ammunition for Wagner forces, it wasn’t really outlining – at least as far as I could tell – sort of a new policy agenda for fighting the war. And it seems like Putin is pretty much engaging in the hard line approach to the conflict.

Dr. Mankoff: Yeah, I think what Prigozhin wanted was that the war would be fought more effectively with less corruption, with more sort of organization of society, and with just better organization and discipline within the military, more like what he had in Wagner.

Mr. Bergmann: It seems like a typical think-tank report: just do this better. (Laughter.)

Dr. Mankoff: Well, I think Prigozhin might be in search of a job, so – (laughter) –
Mr. Bergmann: Yeah, I don’t think – he’s not going to be a non-resident anytime soon. (Laughter.)

Maria, maybe talk about the impact on Russian public opinion because, you know, the Russian forces on the front lines would be seeing the kind of chaos and mayhem that’s happening behind them. And how would you think the Russian public is going to react to what they’ve just witnessed?

Dr. Snegovaya: So, as I said, most of what the Russian public opinion reflects is where they sense the status quo is at. So in a lot of ways usually – and that’s a very legitimate complaint – when we run polls, what we measure, as a matter of fact, is TV propaganda. And the way Putin and the Kremlin propaganda are now trying to present it, now that they got the signals – which they did not have during the weekend, so they were really either silent or really lost – visibly lost – now they’re presenting it as a wise, strong action by Kremlin and Putin in particular, who has been able unilaterally to stop this insurgency from destroying the homeland and whatnot.

So this is – it will be really interesting to see the polls – how they respond – but I would not be surprised not to see a mighty difference because of that – does it see there is no reputational damage? No. Because the true dynamic unravels underneath these polls.

Something interesting, though – based again on the data provided by the Open Minds Institute, who are doing a very good and timely job – they actually show that one, the supporters in their polls tend to be less supportive of the war continuation than those people in their sample who support the Ministry of Defense in this like artificial contestation between Wagner and Russian MOD, which is interesting, right? It seems like Wagner and Prigozhin’s figure at this point accumulates everything that’s wrong about this war in the mind of different people – which, again, may or may not be exploited further, depending on what happens next.

So once again, I think the fundamental damage to the Kremlin is really, really, really big, and that’s because the status quo has shattered. Whether the polls are going to be reflecting that or not, we’ll see.

Mr. Bergmann: What strikes me is that, you know, if you think about the decision that could come to the Kremlin that has the most kind of political difficulties would be additional mobilization. And that has direct –
Dr. Snegovaya: Which is even worse.

Mr. Bergmann: – impact on the war, and it looks like there’s a need for Russia to probably mobilize in order to really sustain this fight. I mean, do you – do you think they’re going to be able to – Putin may be able to mobilize going forward or is it too risky?

Dr. Snegovaya: At least before the war – or before the election, this has been something that Putin was trying to void, the way it seems, because it had been highly unpopular. And in general, the interesting part that we see here, I mean – and also historically – since the start of this war is that most of the things that are most damaging to Putin are his own doing, right – the mobilization was the first thing, which really – as a result of which the polls dropped – and then, of course, Wagner, and unleashed Prigozhin, who definitely is this sort of – in the Frankenstein sort of replay – really Putin’s own doing as well.

So also, one other thing that we see, right – the way in which Putin responds to this crisis, which is unprecedented. They are very recognizable from the past. He is slow. He takes time, right? He does not act fast. He is a little bit behind it, right? It’s, like – it’s the famous Márquez novel, the Autumn of the Patriarch, right? It seems that the regime is a little bit behind the sequence of the event that he started.

For example, the Security Council meeting which just happened today, in response to all these developments, was actually supposed to be happening as these developments were unraveling, et cetera, et cetera. He probably will be slow to respond to the military demands on the ground, and maybe making some much-needed personnel changes as well. So this all does not really look good for Putin at all going forward.

Mr. Bergmann: What does this mean for Wagner, Catrina, going forward? Will Wagner exist? It seems like it won’t, based off of Putin’s recent speech and basically giving a few alternatives for those in Wagner to either go to Belarus, sign with the Russian military, or just go home. What do you think happens to it?

Ms. Doxsee: So there are a lot of questions up in the air, obviously. (Laughter.) I think one of the big ones is when Putin says all of that, when he talks about this ultimatum between joining the military or going to Belarus, is he talking about the wider Wagner network or is he talking about the Wagner troops who are in Ukraine and Russia? Because there is a substantial
amount of Wagner presence throughout other parts of the world. They’re in the Middle East. They’re in Latin America. And, most significantly, they’re in Africa.

Mr. Bergmann: They’re basically like an autocratic support service, right, that you call and say: Help me. And then they can – you know, do you need security? Do you – yeah.

Ms. Doxsee: Yeah, exactly. The most ominous Ghostbusters, who you gonna call? (Laughter.)

Mr. Bergmann: Yes.

Ms. Doxsee: But they’re – you know, they’re deeply entrenched in a lot of these countries, particularly places like the Central African Republic where they’re more or less running much of the government. Running security and military operations, but also everything from bureaucratic offices to emergency response services. They’ve developed these close relationships in countries that they’re operating in. They’re embedded with the military in places like Mali. And, more importantly, it’s not just the mercenary paramilitary troops that we think of when we hear Wagner.

There are also a wide variety of other companies – you know, shell companies, financial intermediaries, all linked back to Prigozhin. Notably, Prigozhin is that central node in the network that everyone’s connected to. They’re not all linked back to Wagner as the center. It’s Prigozhin. And these are the companies that are getting mining concessions to exploit natural resources to smuggle gold and diamonds out of Sudan and the Central African Republic. They’re the ones who have purchased rights to control local radio stations, that have established French language media outlets to spread Russian propaganda and disinformation. In the legacy of Prigozhin’s, again, Internet Research Agency. There is a huge network across the African continent that is fulfilling Russia’s geopolitical goals that has really reinvigorated Moscow’s footprint on the continent.

And if you just dissolve Wagner, that disappears. If you deeply break it up and cut off a lot of those communication nodes, you cut out some of those financial intermediaries, it falls apart. If you take over the paramilitary side but not all of the companies, you’re doing the work without the gain. In many cases, they’ve gone in for these underpriced contracts, often getting the job to work for a state because they’re able to underbid all of
the competitors who have things like experience, regional knowledge, all of those – all of those silly things.

And so really I think what we’re going to see is Prigozhin trying to shore up control of this big, shadowy network that he has. Control, yes, of our traditional Wagner mercenaries, but also these shell companies, the resource exploitation operations, the disinformation and propaganda services. And, at the same time, we’ll have Moscow jockeying to do the same. That could go in a number of different directions. I expect that we’re likely to see some splintering of the network.

Some of it Prigozhin will likely try to keep close to him, especially in areas where he has close personal relationships either with his own men or with local partners. We’ll see some of it taken over by the state. Some of it, likely the more paramilitary operations, pulled into the military or otherwise put under the control of new leadership that are just much more reined in under the Ministry of Defense’s control. It’s important to note here that Wagner is neither the first nor the last private military company that Russia has used for this purpose, despite, of course, the fact that private military companies are illegal in Russia this whole time. Which is, actually, what gives Putin such leverage over Prigozhin, even if he hadn’t staged the march to Moscow.

But for those broader companies, and really kind of the most at least financially lucrative parts of that Wagner network, things like Lobaye Invest, Meroe Gold, which is a subsidiary of M-Invest – these are shell companies operating in the Central African Republic and in Sudan respectively. They’re likely to be just put under new leadership, someone who’s seen as a loyalist to Putin, someone who has experience in the region, perhaps even someone who is a former colleague in the Wagner network. We’ve seen some competing private military companies formed recently, including one, Convoy, which is led by both the head of Crimea and the man who was former Prigozhin’s sort of right-hand man running operations in Africa.

People like that, if Putin feels that they’re loyal enough to him – or someone like them – could be put in charge of these commercial enterprises that really give a benefit by being ostensibly, you know, private companies. But can still continue to benefit Moscow.

Mr. Bergmann: But this will be difficult, right?
Ms. Doxsee: Oh, yeah.

Mr. Bergmann: I mean, yeah, in some ways –

Ms. Doxsee: None of this will be easy and none of it will be fast.

Mr. Bergmann: In some ways that sort of points to Prigozhin’s leverage, perhaps, that perhaps it could be possible for Prigozhin to maintain some of what he’s doing on behalf of the Kremlin but lose the Russia part. Or maybe not, just given the circumstances. I mean, I think that this is where probably the reticence to go after Prigozhin was pointing to the complexity here. And also, this is a critical tool of Russian foreign policy. So this has real implications not just inside of Russia, but outside.

Ms. Doxsee: Exactly.

Mr. Bergmann: So we’re approaching the kind of final five minutes, and so maybe we’ll do a quick lightning round. But maybe to kick off kind of one thought maybe for you all to react to, is that there had sort of been this presumption that Russia could really just indefinitely sustain a long war. And it strikes me that one of the things that this sort of highlights is that a long war for Russia has costs. I mean, we’ve experienced here this in the United States, where we can indefinitely sustain long wars in Afghanistan, nearly 20 years, in Iraq, in Vietnam. But over time – (laughs) – that, sustaining the long war, has real implications on our – on our society and our willingness to keep going.

And if so, you know, here we’re starting to see internal cracks. Do you think this impacts Russia’s ability and its calculus on whether it can sustain a long war? If you want to react to that, or anything else, to sort of close it out, maybe we’ll go around. Maria.

Dr. Snegovaya: The big question essentially is if Prigozhin in the black swan for Putin regime. I guess we will see. This is something in the making going forward. This is by far, I’d say, the most interesting development we’ve seen since the start of this horrible, horrible war. One big question to me, if the regime will decide to keep Prigozhin alive. Because honestly, you have the power center, quite influential – probably the second most influential at this point in Russia – emerging. And Putin is not exactly known for leaving the – you know, those who betrayed him alive.
So to me, if the regime is still sort of going, making certain sense, right, and is willing to at least preserve the appearance of strength, we should see Prigozhin gone sometime soon. If that does not happen, though, this will create a very interesting dynamic, with essentially Trotsky – Leo Trotsky outside of the country trying maybe to build some kind of insurgency. And knowing Prigozhin’s psychology and personality, we can be assured, right, that he will not leave this hanging if given the opportunity.

So I think this is a very interesting development. We’ll keep watching. I’m just happy to see finally certain cracks emerging in the system. And I think, one thing I’ll say, this is a great opportunity for Ukrainians. They should use it. They certainly should not let it slide, but pursue this opportunity. As Russia starts cracking internally, they should certainly be pushing externally to deepen these cracks.

Mr. Bergmann: Jeff.

Dr. Mankoff: Yeah. So Prigozhin should watch out for people with icepicks. (Laughter.)

Ms. Doxsee: And windows.

Dr. Mankoff: Well –

Dr. Snegovaya: And Novichok.

Dr. Mankoff: So there is a long history of this sort of thing. I think that’s what we’re highlighting here.

Max, to your question about the long war, you know, I’ve been pushing back since this war started against the idea that a long war favors Russia because I think that Russia’s ability to mobilize resources of all kinds – financial, human, technical, and others – is relatively limited. And the sanctions, which we haven’t talked about in here – but the sanctions that have been imposed by the United States and Europe since the start of this war make all of that mobilization much, much more difficult, and we’re seeing it now with the impact on the Russian economy. Figures for industrial production are down. Figures for inflation are up, the currency deprecation. There’s a lot of lingering problems with the economy that are going to become more and more problematic as the war goes on.
That’s leaving aside the consequences of the very high numbers of casualties that Russia’s suffering in Ukraine, which is especially problematic because a lot of the people who are being sent into the conflict are conscripts. And this gets to the point made earlier about a second wave of conscription and what that could mean for political stability.

So I think that Putin gambled initially on a short war, and having failed to triumph in a short war has been pushing the narrative in Russian state media and in public statements that Russia can win a long war because the West is distracted, the West is fickle, the West is decadent, and that all Russia has to do is hold out. And I think what we’re seeing now, with the economic consequences of the sanctions and Prigozhin’s mutiny or whatever we want to call it, is that there are real stresses that Russia is facing, and that its ability to fight a war of this intensity over the longer term is really, really problematic.

There is one big wildcard in all of this, which is what happens in the domestic political context in Western countries, above all the United States. Of course, we have an election coming up in 2024 as well. How the war in Ukraine plays in that election is going to be very important. And I think there’s a hope in Moscow that there will be a pro-peace candidate who comes out of that election and comes to power in January 2025, and that really seems to be the hope that Russia is hanging its hat on right now because I think, as we’ve seen, the longer this war goes on, everything else being equal, the more problematic it’s going to be for not only Russia’s prospects of victory but for Russia’s prospects of political stability.

Mr. Bergmann: OK.

Catrina.

Ms. Doxsee: I absolutely agree that Russia’s unlikely to be successful with the long war for all of the reasons that our colleagues have just said. I mean, my colleagues in the Transnational Threats Project here at CSIS have done analysis showing that in Russia’s war in Ukraine they have suffered more casualties than all of Russia’s other military engagements since World War II combined. That, plus the resources, plus the domestic challenges, plus the cracks within the system, I don’t see how they can sustain this long term.
The other piece that I would then throw in – and this is sort of looking forward more to the future, speculating a bit more – can they sustain those troops coming home? Can they sustain taking on a large number of Wagner troops if they choose to do so? Those troops are going to come back to Russia with stories of what was really happening on the front – stories of fighting against Ukrainians, fighting against people who are just like them; the stories of seeing the effects of that number of casualties, more than all of those other wars combined; the trauma of being there on the frontlines, of being poorly resourced, poorly treated, used as cannon fodder.

Then you also, if you have a large number of Wagner troops joining the official Russian military, these are individuals who, like some of the newer recruits in the military, have very little training, many of them pulled out of prisons, dealing with their either criminal histories or even just the societal stigma that comes with that. But of those who willingly joined Wagner, who signed on with past experience in the Russian military or in intelligence services in Russia, they for the most part chose Wagner because it pays better, it gives better benefits, and they were treated better in it. How are they going to react now when they are pulled into the Russian military once again, they're paid less, they're treated poorly, and they're also dealing with all of this trauma, they're stigmatized potentially depending on what kind of crackdown we ultimately see against Prigozhin and those that have backed him?

All of this feeds into an already unstable domestic environment where there are already cracks in the system. People are already doubting the narratives that they're being sold. And so to some extent I don't think that Russia can afford a long war, but I'm also not sure it can afford to bring everyone home.

Mr. Bergmann: Great. I want to thank you all for what was I think a really – a fascinating conversation. Thank you all for joining us. You can come to our website at CSIS.org for more content related to all things Russia, all things war in Ukraine. And again, please subscribe to our podcast Russian Roulette and The Eurofile, where we will post this conversation later in the week. So thank you. Thank you very much and have a great evening.

(END)