

A grave dilemma for post-Prigozhin Wagnerites



by Lev Tsitrin

I wonder what goes through the heads of the Wagnerites now that their boss, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who two months ago ordered Wagner's march on Moscow to protest what was to him an unpatriotic, bad-faith self-dealing of the military officialdom (but not – heaven forbid! – to depose Putin) and who subsequently made his peace with Putin, all complete with official pardon and return of all assets, had been killed – by all accounts, liquidated on Putin's orders. Does this mean that Putin's "pardon" was no pardon – and that other participants in the march are still in Putin's cross-hairs, their loyalty to him being forever tarnished by their employment by Wagner?

The common theory that the killing of Prigozhin is the first step in Putin's push to take personal control over Wagner,

perhaps even absorbing it into Russian armed forces rests on a couple of assumptions: that Putin did not already control Prigozhin – and that Wagner will be loyal to Putin once Prigozhin is gone.

I find both assumptions highly doubtful. Wagnerites saw Prigozhin as very much a Putin loyalist (though he had the misfortune of being holier than the Pope in what passes nowadays for Russian “patriotism,” and freely broadcasted his views that what the military establishment did was completely inadequate for subjugation of Ukraine, branding top brass as traitors) – and from that perspective, his killing is a clear sign to Wagnerites that sincere patriotism does not count, that Putin’s promises are worthless, and – most important of all – raising the question of, “who’s next”?

If being a Wagnerite is, in Putin’s eye, the mark of Cain, then who is safe? And that, in turn, produces for Wagnerites, a dilemma: is it us, or him? Did Putin decide to do Wagnerites in, seeing them as a threat? If that’s their conclusion, then they have no choice but to act against Putin. After all, the main lesson of Prigozhin’s death is, that in dealing with Putin one can’t go half-way. Prigozhin tried, only to be played with like a cat plays with a mouse – so there is no alternative to acting decisively, taking Putin out.

And this is what indeed might happen if Wagnerites decide, “it’s either Putin, or us.” Of course, it is not a fact that this is how they will see things, but they might – and who knows what they will do if they feel cornered?

And the same goes for Belarus’ Lukashenko, too. It was he who mediated between Prigozhin and Putin during Wagner’s “march,” and it was he who negotiated the detente between the two, guaranteeing safety to Prigozhin and his Wagnerites, and offering them safe harbor in Belarus – ostensibly, to both train Belorussian troops, and to destabilize borders of Poland and the Baltic republics, now that Belarus had a nuclear

umbrella provided by Russia.

Well, those may have been Lukashenko's intentions in hosting the Wagner, but now Wagnerites may feel threatened in their new Belorussian homeland, seeing Lukashenko as Putin's co-conspirator who betrayed and entrapped them. Lukashenko may well become Wagner's target too – and to boot, easier to reach.

The upshot of all this is, that Prigozhin's death may backfire, depending on whether Wagnerites will decide that it is safe to submit to Putin – or that doing so would be repeating Prigozhin's deadly mistake. Will they see Putin, along with Lukashenko, as a vengeful, implacable threat to them personally? Wagnerites are rough men with strong instinct for self-preservation – and who knows what that instinct will tell them? That it is safer to submit to Putin rather than to oppose him – or that submitting to him is futile and puts them in mortal peril, and that they must strike first, and try to get rid of him – acting decisively this time around? It may go either way, I think. Time will tell.