

Who's afraid of Evgeny Prigizhin? Or rather, who isn't – but should be?



by Lev Tsitrin

One had to have at least a four-processor brain to follow the volume and variety of commentary on Wagner boss Evgeny Prigizhin's calculus when he ordered an armored column of his Wagnerites' to "march for justice" on Moscow. Was it a coup aimed at overthrowing Putin? Or was it a mere mutiny against the Russian Defense minister and Chief of Staff whom he accused of incompetence? What was he thinking when he said, in that many words, that the official reasons for invading Ukraine was baloney, in a recorder message on his channel that reaches millions of Russians? Was he still a patriot who was holier than the pope – which was something Putin tolerated in the past, knowing Prigozhin's deep loyalty and patriotic intentions – or did Prigozhin really soured on the Ukrainian

adventure? Was the march “backstabbing” Mother Russia, or did it aim at saving her from dumb-witted, thieving bureaucrats who took over the Russian Defense ministry and the army? Did Putin disappear from sight because he didn’t know what to do, – and just ran away? Or was he secretly working to organize a resisting force? Was Putin losing his grip on power, and the public perception of invincibility? And was the tumult good or bad for the Ukrainians?

By now, the dust settled a little. Prigozhin turned out to not have planned a coup against Putin’s power, and – having been persuaded by Belarus’ Lukashenko, accepted his invitation to go live in Belarus, apparently as a lonely exile – yet the rumors are now swirling of his building camps there for his Wagnerites.

At this point, the guessing game shifted to “how safe will Prigozhin be in Lukashenko’s Belarus, given Putin’s notorious vindictiveness?” To my mind, however, the situation reminds Aesop’s fable of the snakes and porcupine who on a rainy day asked to stay in their dry nest. They let him in – but when the rain was over and they, greatly inconvenienced by the porcupine’s spikes, asked him to leave, he refused, having found the nest to his liking.

I think Mr. Lukashenko may well find himself in a very similar situation if Prigozhin brings his private army over. Putin, we are now told, was prepared to crush the march (though the end result was not too encouraging in this respect, for the score was in Wagnerites’ favor: they knocked out of the sky a bunch of approaching Russian helicopters, and a transport plane – but suffered no casualties themselves). If Wagner feels chagrined, and decides to flex muscles, Belarus may have some trouble keeping them in check – Wagnerites are battle-hardened troops who think little of shooting first when they perceive danger.

So while Lukashenko has been declared a big winner in the

dust-off between Prigozhin and Putin as having been able to find a diplomatic solution that diminished them both and elevated his reputation (at least in the analysis by the *New York Times* titled "[One Big Winner of Kremlin-Wagner Clash? The Dictator Next Door.](#)" I am not sure that this awarding of laurels is not premature. Lukashenko may yet come to rue his hospitality.

Think of it: Prigozhin could not (and apparently did not) want to topple Putin – but Russia is a much bigger country. Knocking down Lukashenko's regime to take his seat may be far easier. Would Putin come to Lukashenko's help? Well, why would he? Lukashenko is loyal to Putin – but so will be Prigozhin. And he may be far more useful: while Lukashenko let Putin use Belarus' land and airspace to invade Ukraine, and surrendered the war materiel he had, he is adamantly opposed sending his troops into battle. Prigozhin who, until recently, was a fiery proponent of the war – and hugely popular as some kind of Jean of Arc and Robin Hood combined – won't have any such scruples. He used up prisoners by the thousands as cannon fodder – why not throw Belarussians into the fire? Prigozhin may be much more useful to Putin as Belarus' dictator than Lukashenko is.

For now, this is Lukashenko's triumph. I may well be proven wrong by the future events – yet I can't help wondering how long it will stay that way.