

Weekly Commentary 25 – June 2023

The Russian “mutiny”

In case you were not counting, there were many wars last week. There was the war on inflation of varying intensity all over the G7 and China; there was the paused counter-offensive in Ukraine where blood is really shed; there was the war of words between the US and China immediately after a mission of peace by Tony Blinken; and then most spectacularly of all, there was a “civil war” in Russia which didn’t actually come to pass.

The last of the above “wars” was touted to be an indication of the serious weaknesses in Putin’s government. Zelensky was the first one to cheer, saying that Russia is out of control, and that Putin was running away from Moscow. There were all kinds of reports emerging from western media on how Russia was having a civil war; on how the country would break up and how the west should get ready, having missed the chance in 1990-91 when they were not ready for a breakup of the Soviet Union, to divvy up the resulting smaller political entities that would emerge from the subsequent chaos. This was the coup that the neo-cons in the entire western political elite were pushing for, and it happened suddenly. It was timely for boosting western morale. Just as the Bakhmut meat-grinder battle ended in a defeat for Kyiv, and with the counter-offensive which immediately followed faltering in no man’s land without reaching even the Russian first defensive line, this is fortuitous political manna from heaven. When there is this “gift” of a civil war, putsch, coup or mutiny coming about on Saturday morning, many Russia-haters pounced on it to clap and cheer.

The trouble for all these celebrants of the “demise” of the Russian Federation is that it ended just as quickly as it started. Before most people even knew it began. WTF? The whole show closed “without any bloodshed” - according to the leader of the rebellion, Prigozhin of the Wagner military company - in less than 24 hours, and with just about 12 hours of exposure to international busybodies. Those who wanted to see Russians kill each other had their hopes dashed. And a lot of those who jumped up and down with glee, had to abruptly sit down quietly again with demonstrable disappointment.

Hell, on the surface of it, Russia scored an own goal. The mutiny gifted the collective west and Kyiv with all the talking points to denigrate Moscow with and that could have toppled the Putin-led government in a single weekend, something they have been hoping for since before the war began. They didn’t even have to engineer it; the Russians apparently brought it upon themselves.

Not really.

As I see it, the whole episode was just a show. There are some analysts who even said the whole thing was planned to draw out and expose the subversive plans of Russia's foes, including those of terrorist organizations in Belarus. This is speculation of course, but there may be some truth in this characterization since an insurrection like this which can get potentially out of control BUT was instead not allowed to do so, does show competence and significant political skill on the part of Putin. Heck, if so, then the dramatic recovery from the crisis, and the abrupt end of the bloodless "mutiny" are spectacular demonstrations of Russia, especially the regular military's, total support for Putin.

In my humble opinion, 24 hours ago when the coup started, Putin's political fortunes and international standing looked like shit; now, after the end of the circus, the man looks stronger and more ensconced than ever before. All other opponents of Putin will think twice before they take up cudgels against him now. Whatever the real causes of the mutiny, one cannot disagree that Putin is more powerful in his country than just one day earlier.

There is an interesting, though unimportant, question of whether the circus was staged.

For those of you not following this closely, here is a recap of what happened, coloured with my humble observations.

Late Friday, there was the first news that Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner Military Company, which has 50,000 soldiers after the Battle of Bakhmut, has led 25,000 of them in an armed "march for justice" against the Russian Ministry of Defence, and specifically against Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, and Chief of Staff, Vasily Gerasimov. Prigozhin has accused these two of being corrupt, that they held back the supply of ammunition to the Wagnerians during the long Bakhmut battle and that they bombed the camps of the group in Ukraine just last week. The first two of these allegations have been going on for months, even as the battle proceeded, and the third allegation pushed him over the edge into mutiny. Everyone who was shown the photos of that alleged raid on the Wagnerian camp however could find any evidence of an air attack. That's the first sign for me to suspect that this is all manufactured.

The Wagnerians sent a convoy from their base in Luhansk to Rostov on the Don, a city of one million and more importantly, where the HQ of the Russian military's Southern Command is located. Those of us following the show, saw tanks in one main square in Rostov. I didn't see more than half a dozen at any one time, at any one place. There were perhaps a couple of dozen of Wagnerian soldiers, and we have ordinary citizens milling

around these “rebels”. It was a totally amicable atmosphere, almost festive. I thought, some rebellion...

There was an announcement that the Wagner group has taken control of Southern Command building. Apparently, there was no resistance from the Russian army. Huh? Hey, the Wagnerians were not taking over a police station. This is the headquarters of an army command conducting the war in Ukraine. Any intelligent person must be thinking that this is, shall we say, unusual?

Putin, by the morning of Saturday, Moscow time, came out to say, in a stern message, that the mutiny would not be tolerated, and he called on the country to unite behind him and defend against treason. By any standards, this is a serious charge. They get shot for things like that. And just as Prigozhin never once criticised Putin personally in the way he did Shoigu and Geraisimov, Putin also never called out Prigozhin by name.

The supposedly 25,000 strong army of the rebels then said they were driving to Moscow, presumably to depose the government. The TV images of this drive 1100 km northwards showed three tanks on flatbed trucks and three lorries – that’s all I could see from the TV coverage. Along the way, they said that they shot down three Russian army helicopters, which were approaching to attack the column. To prove that, one image of a burning helicopter was shown. Given how images can be photoshopped with great ease these days, that image could well have been taken previously in Ukraine.

The column skirted around the city Voronezh, and declared that there was some kind of surrender of regular Russian military to the rebels. The Wagnerians were supposed to be now just 200 km south of Moscow. Meanwhile, everything was calm in the capital. On Red Square, there were still tourists. Life proceeded normally.

Then it was reported that the army started to block bridges on the road to Moscow with defences being set up. Oh really... Did anyone see any of this? I didn’t. Nobody else seemed to either.

Suddenly, within an hour the battle for Moscow was supposed to begin, a negotiated end of the crisis was announced. This happened before nightfall in Moscow. President Lukashenko of Belarus, said that he has successfully concluded a peace deal between the Russian government and the Wagnerians. The deal was that the Wagnerians would return to their camps in Ukraine, and Prigozhin would leave for Belarus, pardoned by Putin. Notably, the

words “in exile” were not even attached to the description of his departure. All the rank and file were forgiven as well.

I don't know about you, and I am not a conspiracy theorist, but the whole affair was, in the end, a storm over a teacup, no, a goddamned espresso cup, if even that. This is not even real. What mutiny?

For all the hoopla that exploded in the west and Kyiv on the prospect that Russia would be broken up by an internal civil war – like the Tsarist regime was uprooted by the tumultuous events of 1917 - there was marked disappointment at the cessation of “hostilities”. You could sense that on all the western TV channels. All that has happened is a demonstration of how Putin and his inner circle have unchallengeable control over the Russian government. If people are looking for a “fence that can be kicked to bring it all down”, they ain't gonna find it in the year 2023.

As a matter of fact, the jubilant mood that prevailed for about 12 hours in the west were very quickly deflated and brought down to earth. Let's say that my observations above were completely wrong, and that there could have indeed been a violent uprising that would make Putin look bad. Here are some points that didn't make sense:

- 1) Prigozhin and his Wagner group are mercenaries. They are not an aggrieved social group that are driven by hunger, poverty and oppression. They go to war for money, and if they were not paid well, that can be easily fixed with more money. There are no deep emotional legs to a mercenary group chasing more gratuities.
- 2) The “25,000 strong” army was a feint. At any one time, nobody can verify that the mutiny was not conducted by just a few thousand people, with a minimal number of tanks and APCs to create a Hollywood image of a mutiny. Remember, there was no air cover. To take on the regular Russian army, police, territorial defence that can be counted in the millions and the airforce, that can be mustered by the government, with just a few thousand Wagnerians, is a joke. The ability of the airforce to blow those few assets that were on the open road to Moscow is a foregone conclusion. This is so obvious that Prigozhin and his crew cannot be serious in the first place.
- 3) And with just those few assets on display, it was easy for the show to be packed up without it being disruptive at all. When those tanks left Rostov, the TV image of note is of the civilian crowd waving goodbyes and taking selfies with Prigozhin...a rather orderly mutiny, won't you say? That's not what “mutiny” means. It was a parade. In the context of a country with 135 million people, a 25,000 man rebellion represents just an angry village. It cannot have any impact on the entire country. Take out the government? Really? We should not expect Prigozhin to be that stupid.

- 4) Neither Prigozhin criticised Putin nor the other way round throughout much of the 24 hour insurrection. And if not the head of state, then this is only a resurrection against the defence minister? The chief of staff? Come on...stop pulling my leg.
- 5) For all the threats of violence, the affair ended with zero fatalities (Prigozhin's words, not mine). Really?
- 6) Prigozhin leaves Russia for Belarus. Fully pardoned. Free to go... To Belarus...that's just like being in Russia. There must be a dacha waiting. If it were really treason, would that even be possible?
- 7) How did Lukashenko get involved? If he were not confident of a quick resolution, why would he get involved? This is a leader with significant experience of his own mutinies and terrorists. Lukashenko knows a lot more than we all do, and he has not said anything to reveal what he knows.

All in all, the whole story of an armed insurrection is unlikely from sudden start to quick end. I could be wrong, but this seems like a manufactured crisis. But I hate to be fooled.

The big question to me, and you don't have to read on if you don't agree, is why is this circus allowed to go on. I think there are two ways of analysing it.

The first is that Putin and Prigozhin were in it together. For good intentions, from the Russian point of view. My argument would go like this. The Russians have won the economic sanctions war against the collective west, and they are very close to winning the military war against the NATO proxy army. But they are significantly behind the narratives or propaganda war. The collective west puts up a deafening story of Russian aggression, and Moscow has to counter it. Here is a recent example of it in the journal Foreign Policy.

The West Is Preparing for Russia's Disintegration

Amid war in Ukraine, some strategists are setting their eyes on the "decolonization" of Russia itself.

By [Anchal Vohra](#), a columnist at Foreign Policy.

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Russia's poor performance on the Ukrainian battlefield, and the growing belief that Russian President Vladimir Putin's nuclear threat shouldn't be taken at face value, has emboldened

Western analysts and Russian dissidents to publicly call for “decolonization” of Russia itself. They are referring here to the vast Russian Federation, the successor of the Soviet Union that consists of 83 federal entities, including 21 non-Slavic republics.

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, an independent U.S. government agency with members from the U.S. House of Representatives, Senate, and departments of defense, state, and commerce, has declared that decolonizing Russia should be a “moral and strategic objective.” The Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum, comprising exiled politicians and journalists from Russia, held a meeting at the European Parliament in Brussels earlier this year and is advertising three events in different American cities this month. It has even released a map of a dismembered Russia, split into 41 different countries, in a post-Putin world, assuming he loses in Ukraine and is ousted.

Western analysts are increasingly pushing the theory that Russian disintegration is coming and that the West must not only prepare to manage any possible spillover of any ensuing civil wars but also to benefit from the fracture by luring resource-rich successor nations into its ambit. They argue that when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 the West was blindsided and failed to fully capitalize on the momentous opportunity. It must now strategize to end the Russian threat once and for all, instead of providing an off-ramp to Putin.

But many others see a rump Russia as a more severe threat to global peace and security and warn against emasculating an enemy that, even when weaker than the West militarily and economically, still possesses almost 6,000 nuclear warheads, armed militias, and vast resources trapped in a sparsely populated landscape bordering China.

Janusz Bugajski, a senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, has recently written a book called *Failed State: A Guide to Russia's Rupture*. He argues that Western sanctions have squeezed Russian economy and there is a “disquiet in numerous regions over their shrinking budgets.” He advocates against providing security guarantees to Putin.

Others who agree with this thinking say Putin’s defeat in Ukraine will destroy his strongman cult and expose him as a weak leader. Once the elites in the non-Slavic republics sense Moscow is neither rich enough to fill their pockets nor militarily strong enough to crush their dissent, they will rise.

Sergej Sumlenny, director of the European Resilience Initiative Center in Berlin, and a former chief editor at Russian business broadcaster RBC-TV, said Putin has controlled the diverse nations by corrupting their elite and by instilling the dread of a Chechnya-style conflict.

In 1991, after the Soviet Union crumbled, 14 of Russia’s nations declared sovereignty. The bloody campaign in Chechnya a few years later was designed to discourage and dissipate independence movements, while Putin’s heavily centralized policies brought the supposedly autonomous republics firmly under Moscow’s control.

But the war in Ukraine has exposed Putin as a disillusioned, feeble man not worthy of the image he had cultivated, Sumlenny argued.

“He was seen [in Russia] as a leader who could defeat anyone, and Ukraine was seen as so weak that it would be defeated without any effort,” Sumlenny told *Foreign Policy* over the phone from Berlin. “But now, everyone, including the ruling elite in republics and regions, can see that Moscow neither has the money nor a strong army.”

“If you are a mafia boss the worst thing that can happen to you is that your subordinates suddenly realize that you are not as strong as you claimed to be.”

The Russians know that they are being targeted. And bad-mouthed. Here is a Putin statement that makes his views clear, reported by the newspaper, Independent:

Putin claims West is trying to break up Russia into different states

Putin also said the West wants to drive a wedge between different ethnic and national groups in Russia

Lucy Skoulding, The Independent

Friday 19 May 2023 18:28

Vladimir Putin has said the West is trying to drive a wedge between different ethnic and national groups in Russia.

The Russian President said on Friday the West wants to break the country into lots of different states, according to Reuters.

He added that the more sanctions the West hits Russia with, the greater the level of cohesion within Russian society.

Putin added that the sanctions being imposed on Russia were actually helping to unite the Russian people rather than dividing them.

As reported by Reuters, Putin said in comments on Friday: “There are attempts to drive a wedge between peoples of our country.

“They say Russia should be divided up into tens of different states.”

Alright then. If there is all this bad press and propaganda, the criticism that he is a weak leader is not good for him. Let’s say his reaction is, “let’s do a psych-op to change that narrative.” Put up a 24 hour show, so that what comes up clear at the end is that he, Putin, can be seen to be totally in control, the army is behind him, and the country is united. Even the Wagnerians, seen to be a formidable army, would have succumbed to his orders, ultimately quelled by the Russian Ministry of Defence under his command.

At the end of the day (and I do mean a “day”), you cannot help but be impressed with the speed and fortitude of Putin’s leadership of a formidable military power. The proverbial “fence that can be kicked down to reveal a weak country” does not exist. If it did, Wagner’s

“mutiny” would have done it. Now, Putin has shown that even a force with the capability to take down the Ukrainian Armed Forces at Bakhmut cannot topple him.

During the mutiny, all kinds of Russio-haters crawled out of the woodwork. It has even been reported that in Belarus, thought to fall like another domino if Putin goes down, Lukashenko’s government saw anti-Minsk terrorist groups going public to call for a real mutiny against Lukashenko. All those have now been exposed. I will bet that those insurgents won’t be getting a pardon.

In this scenario, Putin, Prigozhin and Lukashenko will be chugging beers in Minsk...

You want to take on these guys?

Then there is the perverse logic of such a psych-ops offensive. The point that Russia would be making is that, hey, you guys in the west want regime change? Push it too hard, and you will get a Prigozhin-type guy taking over. Putin is the “nicest” fella around. He can control the war in Ukraine, drag out the destruction until the last Ukrainian and keep the nuclear arsenal safe from men more determined to fight the west. Take him out and you will get a strongman who is not your friend, who might want to accelerate the war (Prigozhin has been saying this for a long time, calling the regular Russian army ineffective). Don’t regret what you ask for...

Whether it is the first objective or the second, this argues that a fake mutiny will show to the collective west that if Putin is a strong leader, you don’t want to take him on, or alternatively, if he is a weak (ie pacifist) leader, it is far wiser to just leave him there. That’s how I would read it. So, Russian-haters, ditch the bellicosity and the constant and grating calls for regime change. This could be a Russian counter-offensive to the west’s propaganda war.

Of course, that is just one interpretation of the flow of events in that 24 hours of an improbable “mutiny” in Russia. There is another interpretation – that Prigozhin was genuinely aggrieved and wanted to make a public demonstration of his unhappiness. The “march for justice” is for real.

This alternative scenario is that Putin and Prigozhin are not in cohorts to create a false narrative of internal strife. It would then truly be just a matter of Prigozhin being unhappy over the lack of gratitude for his role in fighting against the Ukrainians. Among his gripes, Prigozhin revealed that the Ministry of Defence is reorganizing the army in Ukraine and

plans to integrate the 50,000 Wagnerian force into the regular army that would make its leader irrelevant. His protest is therefore a reaction to an ungrateful top brass.

The other side, ie the Ministry of Defence, would say that Prigozhin is not a trained military officer, totally undisciplined and although during the Battle of Bakhmut, the Wagnerians were in fact commanded by General Surovikin, nicknamed General Armageddon from his Syrian exploits, Prigozhin was always hogging the limelight. Surovikin is the man who defeated the Ukrainian army in Bakhmut through the clever use of attrition warfare, and he is currently responsible for the strategy of deep defence throughout the occupied/liberated territories, with multiple lines of entrenched defences and extensive minefields prepared while the Bakhmut fight was ongoing, and his strategies have so far foiled every Ukrainian army attempt to break through to the Azov Sea. In other words, Prigozhin is not essential to lead Wagner in future efforts. And Prigozhin may be just envious that for all the accolades showered on him by Putin, the greater success in the beating back of the Ukrainian counteroffensive by the regular army's generals may diminish his standing. It would simply be a case of an egotistical craving for glory. Most analysts think that this is indeed what is happening.

Even if Prigozhin's complaints are valid, he cannot be that stupid as to lead an army of a few thousand to march on Moscow. He cannot be ignorant of the impossible odds in his gambit. Did he really hope that the Russian army or the general public would support his quarrel against the defence minister? Did he think he can topple an entire government which he has to know is quite united behind Putin?

And if he had felt so strongly that he has been slighted, motivated to lead a high profile mutiny, would he just give up in a few hours?

It is all very improbable. But if it is real, then the episode ended up with the same results as in the case when it is orchestrated. Putin does not end up looking weak. He looks like he is in total control of the government and the military.

The way I see it, this audacious rebellion against the Russian government has been seen to fail. The next one who thinks of trying would know what is the precedent and what are the consequences. If the next culprit does not have the battle honours of the Wagner founder or of his soldiers, is there any prospect of innocuously going away to Belarus for a life in a dacha? Nobody will risk incurring a similarly strong and determined response as we have seen this weekend and end up being sent to the gallows.

Of course, I don't have any inside knowledge on this matter more than any other person just watching the news. I am just speculating on the basis of observation and logic. I could be completely wrong.

Nevertheless, the consequences of a fake or genuine mutiny are the same. For all those who think that this makes Putin look weaker, I would like to ask, after this time, who else would want to try this stunt and hope to get away without consequences as Prigozhin did. If that is the case, then logically, we can only say that Putin will have fewer challenges to his authority going forward. That is a definition of greater strength. In short, he manufactured a crisis to demonstrate his command and control capabilities, perhaps even popularity.

As Taiwan's Chen Shui-bian was alleged to have done, arranging his own shooting way back when...to win another term of the presidency.

In the 24 hours since the insurrection was put down, Putin has been seen to come out strong against the collective west. His tough warning to all those who are Russo-phobic is: Do not even dare..."

We will wait a few more days to see what happens. If there is another rebellion, then I shall be happy to say that I am wrong. But if this leads to a renewed offensive in Ukraine soon, then I will know that I am right. Putin has acquired more political power to take on his foes.

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Un-Influencer in a World full of Hubris