



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Prigozhin's exile is not enough - Putin will have to banish him from the Internet



The confession of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the exiled head of the paramilitary Wagner Group, at the beginning of the year, that he not only built but also invented the famous troll farm in St. Petersburg will remain a threat to Vladimir Putin in his confrontation with the rebels.

If Prigozhin's confession from last February is nothing more than mere bragging, for Putin, his physical exile to Belarus will not be enough to stop the rebellion. He will have to banish him from cyberspace as well.

"I've never just been the financier of the Internet Research Agency. I invented it, I created it, I managed it for a long time. It was founded to protect the Russian information space from boorish aggressive propaganda of anti-Russian narrative from the West," replied Prigozhin last February regarding the long-repeated accusations that he was behind the fake news factory in St. Petersburg.

Due to the established influence on the 2016 US election results and support for Donald Trump, the US Treasury Department introduced sanctions against Prigozhin's IRA in 2018.

According to the Treasury Department, this troll factory created a large number of fake accounts on social media to spread disinformation, which reached millions of people online during the election campaign.

Those were the days of happiness and triumph for Vladimir Putin and Yevgeny Prigozhin because influencing the US presidential election has been a dream that no ruler in Moscow could ever achieve.

The factory of lies in St. Petersburg had a series of successes in the UK during the campaign to withdraw from the EU and the 2017 French presidential elections, and has remained an intractable problem for many democratic states to this day.

Fear of online invasion

It became a nightmare for Vladimir Putin last

weekend. After the fear of the Wagner Group's invasion of Moscow was gone, the fear of Prigozhin's troll farm activation appeared as a second wave of the attack.

The physical removal of Prigozhin from Russia to Belarus and the lightning-quick seizure of everything they found in the Wagner Palace in St. Petersburg was not enough to keep the peace.

According to reports, an urgent ownership takeover of Prigozhin's media holding, which also includes the IRA troll farm, is underway, with the idea of it passing into the hands of loyalists.

Another Putin's close friend, billionaire banker Yury Kovalchuk, was mentioned as the new owner of Prigozhin's propaganda industry Patriot Media Group.

According to Forbes, Putin's "cashier" and long-time friend since their days in St. Petersburg is worth \$2.5 billion.

He has been under US sanctions since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 as one of Vladimir Putin's closest business associates.

The fact that the chair of his company is Alina Kabaeva, an Olympic gymnast rumoured to be Putin's lover, also proved his closeness to Putin.

For now, Mr Kovalchuk represents a friendly guarantee to the Russian leader that he will not get stabbed in the back. But wasn't Yevgeny Prigozhin even more convincing in this regard?

Will the fake news industry turn against its masters?

Removing the cyber infrastructure from Prigozhin's hands is almost as significant as thwarting his coup attempt last weekend.

Prigozhin controlled the demonic fake news industry, which spread the virus for years.

He was the owner and the heart of this project, which has been working in full swing, particularly since the start of the aggression against Ukraine. Needless to say, in favour of the Russian conquest campaign.

However, could Putin be sure that Prigozhin's industry would not turn against him, even after he physically dismantled Wagner's attempted coup?

At a time when the top of the Russian army examines the tentacles of the rebellion, and the whereabouts of some of the highest-ranking generals, such as Sergey Surovikin, remain undetermined for days, the fear of the rebellion continuation through cyberspace must be even greater.

Prigozhin and his followers demonstrated superiority in this sphere during the dramatic hours as they approached Moscow.

Superiority on communication platforms

One study showed that Prigozhin used the Telegram communication platform very successfully to popularise his march on Moscow in real time and that the Kremlin tried unsuccessfully to stifle his advertising.

„As the mutiny progressed, Telegram served as ground zero for engaging with Prigozhin's statements and tracking Wagner activity. In contrast, Prigozhin's primary page on VK experienced multiple content restrictions until it was eventually blocked by internet regulator Roskomnadzor,“ was the conclusion of the study of the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.

There are no guarantees that new forms of advertising by Wagner supporters, and perhaps even Prigozhin himself, will not appear online at the very moment when the Kremlin is frantically trying to suppress all the effects of the weekend coup.

At the same time, the Kremlin has been trying

to disavow the participants of the rebellion, particularly its leader, in every way possible, and it needs creative experts and all possible communication channels.

Telegram, one of the most popular platforms, resisted the state's attempts to restrict it during the Wagner rebellion.

Even if it succeeded in doing so, Telegram is one of the most popular platforms for spreading the official state narrative about the war in Ukraine but also against Wagner's rebellion, so any radical limitation of this network's work would represent cannibalism for the Kremlin.

If we assume that Yevgeny Prigozhin has been deported to Belarus, as the autocrat Alexander Lukashenko claimed, that alone would not be enough to keep Putin and the loyalists at ease.

They will make an even greater effort to keep everyone connected with Wagner offline for as long as possible. They are familiar with its destructive capacities because it was a joint project of mass disinformation until recently.