Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: The Editorial Board

# Prigozhin's assassination – Did Putin cross the line of rule by fear?

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had a difficult task at the end of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg. He had to provide at least some explanation for the dramatic events at home to his senior interlocutors from the partner organisation.

The meeting of heads of state of the 5-member bloc (without Russian President Vladimir Putin) was overshadowed at its very end by news about the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the owner of the Wagner paramilitary army and the initiator of the recent coup against the government in the Kremlin.

Just 2 days after broadcasting a video made in Africa and after reports that Wagner would further increase its activities on the continent, Prigozhin died in the still unexplained crash of his private plane.

It is unreasonable to wait for the results of a formal investigation by the Federal Agency for Civil Aviation (Rosaviatsiya) into the causes of the plane crash, given Russia's lengthy history of concealing the causes of plane tragedies.

However, the Kremlin has reasons not to hide that Prigozhin's plane was shot down by anti-aircraft systems or perhaps by planted explosives, since the Kremlin wants the message about the Wagner leader's passing to resonate strongly.

## Fulfilled warning that betrayal has not been forgiven

Prigozhin's plane is modern and reliable (manufactured in 2007). The flight from Moscow to St. Petersburg was scheduled. At the moment of the disaster, it was cruising peacefully at 29,000 feet, where technical incidents do not happen.

The crash happened on the day when, 2 months ago, one thousand armed members of Wagner, led by their commander Prigozhin, marched towards Moscow with demands for the army and the Ministry of Defence.

The assassination of Prigozhin and his closest friends on the day of the "jubilee" of their failed rebellion, and in a manner that raises questions about official involvement, sends a powerful and symbolic message about how Vladimir Putin treats traitors.

In a TV interview 5 years ago, Putin said that he was capable of forgiving, even though not everything, and what he could not forgive was betrayal.

Words spoken long ago hover over the downing of Prigozhin's jet as a warning and confirmation that retribution for disloyalty can be obvious, public and cruel.

## Can Ukraine breathe a sigh of relief?

The assassination of Prigozhin and the top of his Wagner Group will have significant consequences for the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Not directly, given that the activities of this paramilitary in Ukraine ceased after the coup attempt last June.

Indirectly, Ukraine's defence will benefit from the events in Russia, as they testify to major confrontations within the state and military leadership, which now include the direct use

of the military in "court" conflicts.

The removal of General Sergey Surovikin from the leading position in the Air Force on the same day as the downing of Prigozhin's plane and the arrest of militant Igor Girkin (Strelkov) at the end of July showed that a purge of all those whose loyalty was not at 100% had been under way.

Shooting down the plane with Prigozhin signifies its continuation, but probably not its end. The Kremlin, guided primarily by revenge and retribution regarding this particular action, runs the possibility of suffering retaliation from Prigozhin's and even Surovikin's supporters in military and paramilitary institutions.

## A deal with Putin is not possible

With this action, Putin has presented himself (once again) as a man who would break his word because he ignored the amnesty he granted to Prigozhin and his followers after the coup attempt.

Everyone who had previously considered complaining to him about the state of the army or conducting operations in Ukraine understood the message.

They will simply keep it to themselves, but this will only motivate them to think about a radical opposition to the military and political elite.

The mediator image of the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, who convinced Prigozhin and his followers to stop the action against the army and the Ministry of Defence, has also been destroyed in these circles.

Belarus, where some paramilitaries have been deployed after Putin's agreement with Wagner, is the potential first victim of their anger over the murder of their boss and commander.

## How to pacify the remains of Wagner?

In the coming days and weeks, the Kremlin will have to carry out a large and risky operation to remove all traces of discontent among the members of Wagner, still woven into the structures of the army.

The past 2 months of the truce have apparently not been enough to calm the Wagner Group down and immerse it in the official army ranks.

This includes the failed pacification of the Wagner leader, who, despite the "agreement" with Putin, appeared at high-level state events (the summit with African leaders in St. Petersburg) and in combat situations in Africa.

The brutality shown in the elimination of Yevgeny Prigozhin and his close associates might please Putin's bruised ego as satisfaction for the humiliation his loyal friend inflicted on him with an outburst of armed disloyalty last June.

The Russian public will applaud this display of brutal power as a demonstration of the commander-in-chief's resolve to take revenge on those who have betrayed his trust.

But his inner circle may draw a different lesson - that anger and revenge are signs of insecurity or even paranoia of betrayal.

If anti-aircraft defence was utilised to deal with those disloyal on the soil of central Russia, what remains as a means for the next purge at the top - a nuclear arsenal?

By killing Prigozhin in such a dramatic manner, Putin might have already crossed the limit to which he could manage the fear of his subordinates and entered unknown territory, where previous control mechanisms are no longer valid.