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After Prigozhin: The Beginning of the End of Putin's Regime?



CU Denver's Institute for International Business (IIB) and Center for International Business Education and Research hosted an International Executive Roundtable on August 8, 2023 featuring Dr. Christoph H. Stefes, Professor at the Political Science Department and Affiliated Professor of the School of Public Affairs at CU Denver. Dr. Stefes' teaching and research focuses on democracy and democratization, stability of dictatorships, corruption, and, more recently, on the politics of energy transitions and environmental crime. The Business School faculty host and moderator of the event was Associate Dean Andrey Mikhailitchenko, a citizen of both Russia and Ukraine. The event was sponsored by CU Denver's Institute for International Business, the Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER), and the Carole Ann Jemal-Gibson and Greg Gibson Fund for International Business.

Earlier this year, after the start of the war between Russia and Ukraine, Dr. Stefes delivered a roundtable on the topic. In this August 8 roundtable, he provided updated information and a perspective on the stability of Putin's regime after the attempted coup by Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of a large, Russian mercenary

group (Wagner). By using the lens of the theoretical model, he co-developed with colleagues at the Social Science Research Center in Berlin on autocratic stability, Dr. Stefes examined the ways in which Prigozhin's mutiny might or might not destabilize Putin's autocratic regime. He contended that Prigozhin did not constitute an immediate threat to Putin [this was on August 8, prior to Prigozhin's death]; however, Prigozhin laid bare the weaknesses of Putin's autocratic regime and may well have set in motion further destabilizing processes.

Prior to the attempted coup, there were several months of intense conflict between Prigozhin and Russia's military leadership. Prigozhin had scolded the Russian military leadership for undersupplying his troops with weapons and ammunition, and undermining their fight in Ukraine.

On June 23, 2023, Prigozhin sent thousands of his troops from Ukraine into Russia. They advanced quickly to within 60 miles south of the capital, Moscow, capturing Rostov-on-Don, the southern military district headquarters, en route. Rostov-on-Don is strategically important for Russia's war on Ukraine. A day later, the mutiny suddenly surprisingly ended with a settlement between Putin and Prigozhin, ostensibly brokered by Belorussian President Lukashenko.

According to the theoretical model of autocratic stability, people support an autocratic leader for one of three reasons: (1) their fear of retaliation if they do not, (2) personal profit gained by backing the autocrat, and/or (3) the belief that the autocrat actually well serves the country and its people. To retain people's support and remain in power the autocrat must address all three reasons; ideally, he/she manages to institutionalize the ways and means of doing so.

There are three pillars of autocratic stability: (1) legitimation (generation of popular support through providing justification of why the autocrat should remain in power without democratic approval; this can include economic growth, security, ideology), (2) cooptation (creating and maintaining a ruling coalition: the elite—men with guns, money, and a large followership—and rewarding them with power and distribution of spoils), and (3) repression (coercion, surveillance, and soft and hard repression to keep common citizens and the elite in check).

These pillars are enforced in three ways: (1) self-enforcement (institutions are self-enforced because alternative arrangements do not seem conceivable), (2) mutual enforcement (the elite will not generally go up against an autocrat, as it usually fails), and (3) external reinforcement (allies that provide military, technological, and diplomatic assistance, or a booming world economy which bolsters the autocrat's country).

There are moments that might bring down one of the three pillars. This can include economic shocks/tanking economies and military defeat (losing a war). Once one pillar starts to crumble, others often follow suit. Repression might halt the total dissolution of the pillars, but repression might backfire. The outrage it causes might override people's fear who then take to the streets, which can in turn motivate elites to turn against the autocrat.

Putin is a master pillar-builder. *Legitimacy pillar*: Putin enjoyed widespread popularity because high oil and gas prices in the early through mid-2000s, which helped Russia to emerge from the economic slump. Later, victories in Georgia and Crimea fortified his approval. Concurrently, he expanded the propaganda apparatus. *Cooptation pillar*: Putin replaced disloyal elite with close confidants and ensured that the elite's fortunes depended on Putin. He also had various state organizations spy on each other as well as the elite. *Repression pillar*: Initially Putin used soft repression directed against critical NGOs and journalists, as well as against opposition parties

by changing the electoral laws thereby preventing smaller parties from ever winning seats again. About ten to fifteen years ago, he began relying on harsher measures—murdering several opposition journalists and politicians, a practice that has become increasingly prevalent.

Prigozhin's history included prison, where he spent nine years for choking an elderly woman during a gang robbery. After prison he went into the catering/restaurant business and met and became a close confidant of Putin. For his loyalty he was rewarded huge government contracts. Approximately ten years ago Prigozhin assumed leadership of and rapidly expanded the Wagner paramilitary outfit, which is financed by the Kremlin. The Wagner group was instrumental in expanding Russia's global influence—the group was heavily involved in Crimea and eastern Ukraine and is currently engaged in several African countries and Syria. It supports local dictators, expands Russian influence, and in return gets some of the spoils. Prigozhin also founded the Internet Research Agency, a troll farm that was to some degree instrumental in bringing Trump to power in the 2016 election. Prigozhin was an important element of the cooptation pillar. He did the dirty work for the Kremlin abroad, which could then maintain plausible deniability.

Prigozhin regularly lambasted the military leadership (Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Gerasimov) of Russia over the handling of the Ukraine war. They, in turn, wanted to incorporate Wagner into the military structure of Russia. Putin benefited from and essentially used Prigozhin as a mouthpiece to critique the military—which Putin does not trust and of whose performance in Ukraine he disapproves—by having the elites pitted against each other. While Putin used Prigozhin, he also wanted to be sure to control the Wagner group, so it was infiltrated by at least two Russian security agencies (FSB and GRU).

The attempted coup by the Wagner group reveals that the cooptation pillar is weak. Prigozhin became independent of the Kremlin and had

external sources of income as well as autonomous military capabilities. Putin's strategy of playing elites off of each other was not successful. Numerous elites (oligarchs) fled Moscow on June 23, demonstrating little trust in Putin.

The mutiny also revealed weaknesses in the legitimization pillar. Prigozhin often contradicted the official Kremlin narrative, undermining Putin's propaganda. While common citizens disliked Prigozhin, they did not rally behind Putin and against Wagner.

The mutiny also demonstrated weakness of the repression pillar. Security failed to detect the looming coup, and there was no coordinated strike against Wagner. Prigozhin left the attempted coup unharmed, but remained a potential threat [which, of course, Putin has subsequently dealt with].

That Russia's pillars of autocracy have substantial vulnerabilities might encourage others to challenge Putin's rule. On the other hand, Putin might be able to restabilize the pillars by strengthening FSB and military commanders.

What is the probable impact of the coup on the Ukraine war? It may have shattered morale among ordinary soldiers and the Russian population. The military, which needs victories, may be tempted to undertake risky campaigns. The mutiny increased distrust between the military leaders and units—some of them were loyal to the Kremlin and some did not stand up against Prigozhin, which is not good for Russia's war efforts in Ukraine. This is somewhat good news for Ukraine.

In the long run—the next two to five years—Dr. Stefes believes we will likely see the disintegration of Putin's regime.

- Carolyn Cott, Writer and Global Forum Report Contributor