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Wagner's Actions Declared Treasonous by Putin as Paramilitary Seizes Control of Southern Russian City Rostov

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Wagner troops took cover outside the Southern Military District building in Rostov, Russia on Friday, June 24, 2023. By. TASS/ZUMA PRESS

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday morning broke his silence on the unfolding crisis that has resulted in the Wagner paramilitary group — a notorious Russian private military company known for its covert operations worldwide, and a major contributor to Russia's efforts in the Ukraine war — seizing control of Rostov, a city in Southern Russia.

In an unprecedented development, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of Wagner and a longtime Putin confidant, has taken over key military installations in the city, essentially transforming Rostov into

a stronghold. Prigozhin has been a vocal critic of Russia's military leadership, accusing them of feeding Putin misleading information that led to the war in Ukraine.

However, the narrative took an unexpected and alarming turn on Friday: Prigozhin accused the Russian military of causing a "massive" loss of his troops by launching strikes on Wagner positions — a claim denied by the military.

Amidst these fast-developing circumstances, Putin addressed the nation in a televised statement on Friday morning. "I appeal to the Russians, to the military and security agencies and to those who have been pushed onto the path of armed insurgency by deceit and threats."

Describing the developments as an act of "betrayal," Putin condemned the insurgents' actions as treasonous. He expressed his disappointment over the current state of affairs, accusing those behind the mutiny of tarnishing the glory of those who fought for Novorossiia, and betraying the heroes who liberated Soledar and Artemovsk [Bakhmut].

Citing the insurgency as a threat to the nation's stability, Putin promised a stern response. "Any internal turmoil is a mortal threat to our statehood, to us as a nation. Our actions to defend the Motherland will be tough. All those who have taken the path of betrayal will suffer inevitable punishment."

As he updated the nation on the situation in Rostov, he acknowledged that the work of civil and military authorities in the region is disrupted. "Those who organized the military mutiny and raised arms against their comrades-in-arms have betrayed Russia. And they will answer for it. As a citizen of Russia I will do everything to defend the country, decisive action will be taken."

Putin went on to characterize the actions as a "felonious venture, a severe violation, a rebellion in arms." He likened Wagner's usurpation of power to the turmoil of the 1917 revolution that led to the collapse of the Russian Empire. During this time, he noted, the nation was deeply embroiled in World War I, only to have victory snatched away, resulting in significant territorial loss.

"This repetition of history will not be permitted. We are determined to protect our citizens and our nation from all dangers, including that of internal treachery. What we are currently dealing with is unmistakably treachery," Putin stressed. "Any domestic conflict poses a lethal threat to our nationhood and to us as a people. Our response to this threat against the homeland will be severe." He further announced that the military and other security agencies have been duly instructed, including directives to restore control over Rostov.

Entering the military headquarters of Rostov, Prigozhin made a video appearance. He reproached senior Russian officers, declaring that his troops had successfully downed three helicopters that had targeted his forces. "If you persist in sending more, we will bring them all down," he warned, citing their actions as a cause for civilian casualties. He confirmed that key installations, including the city's military airport, were now under his command.

The Wagner leader pledged that his troops will maintain their hold over Rostov until such time as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and the head of the armed forces, General Valery Gerasimov, agree to meet him. He proclaimed, "We are safeguarding Russia."

Prigozhin is a former inmate who established a close rapport with Putin after serving as his caterer in St. Petersburg, according to the Wall Street Journal. Wagner's success in the Ukraine war has propelled him to become one of Russia's most influential and admired figures, commanding an army of tens of thousands of battle-tested troops.

He flourished under Putin's authoritarian regime, WSJ reported, where the Russian leader maintained control over his subordinates by instigating competition among them. Wagner's forces were the only Russian troops to make significant progress in Ukraine in nearly a year, capturing the city of Bakhmut last month. Prigozhin has also gained a substantial following for his outspoken, populist condemnation of Russian elites.

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