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Prigozhin's death

The deaths of Prigozhin and several other key Wagner Group figures in a plane crash appears to be a delayed reaction to his June revolt against the Russian state, but Putin remains in a difficult position and is under pressure to escalate his war against Ukraine.



On 23 August, Yevgeny Prigozhin suffered the fate widely expected after his [mutiny](#) and [march](#) on Moscow two months earlier. Russian President Vladimir Putin was clear at the time that these were acts of treachery. His view that traitors cannot be forgiven and his record of pursuing them across borders and for many years is well known.

The surprise was that Putin had appeared to reconcile with Prigozhin, allowing him to remain at large in Russia despite the initial deal to exile him to Belarus. He even maintained a high profile, including by appearing at the [Russia–Africa Summit](#) in July and by continuing with the Wagner Group's activities in Africa, from where he had returned just before his death.

It seems that Putin merely postponed Prigozhin's death, probably to lull him and others into a false sense of security while the security services conducted their investigation into the extent of sympathy for, complicity in and foreknowledge of the Wagner revolt in military and other circles. It is likely that they have now concluded this investigation. General Sergei Surovikin, detained after the revolt and not seen since, was fired as head of the Russian Aerospace Forces immediately before Prigozhin's death. This timing is unlikely to be a coincidence.

Putin has a record of employing exotic means to punish 'traitors', including radioactive polonium and the military nerve agent Novichok. In this case, the symbolic resonance of a plane crash – mirroring

Wagner's own shooting down of six Russian aircraft during its abortive revolt – is clear.

The plane crash that killed Prigozhin also killed several other key Wagner figures. It was an efficient way to decapitate the organisation, the future of which is now unclear. There are already signs that its forces deployed in Belarus after the revolt may be preparing to leave. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu will likely resume his plans to integrate most Wagner forces into the regular armed forces, and Russian military intelligence (GRU) may take control of Wagner's lucrative activities in Africa.

Prigozhin's funeral will be significant. If Putin wishes to emphasise that Prigozhin died as a traitor, he will ignore it. Prigozhin's supporters may use the moment to eulogise him and his critique of the Kremlin's conduct of the war, which could strengthen the hostility of a core group of Wagner loyalists towards the Kremlin.

This episode shows how little trust or understanding exists among Russian elites, including long-time associates. Prigozhin seemed confident of his safety, just as Putin had been confident, until the Wagner revolt, of Prigozhin's loyalty. Each misjudged the other despite years of working together.

Prigozhin's June revolt was the biggest threat so far to Putin's presidency. It was driven by ego-fuelled frustration with Putin's conduct of Russia's war in Ukraine. Although Prigozhin is dead, Putin remains in a difficult position and is under pressure from hardline *siloviki* to escalate the war by mobilising far more of Russia's human and material resources.

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