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# Opinion piece

*Aleks*

11–14 minutes

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Since it is being widely discussed right now, I decided to also express my opinion about what is going on with Prigozhin. A little remark before I start: Since I am very short of time, I decided to write a very small opinion piece, not an analysis. I did no research for this. Hence, take it for what it is. An opinion and NOT an analysis. So, let's start.

I'm not going to write here about the publicly known background of Prigozhin. For that just do some research. For example, go to Wikipedia for a quick breakdown. What I certainly will do is to make some assumptions for which I do not have any evidence. Prigozhin was in prison for some time until 1990. Then he sold hot dogs in St. Petersburg. Exactly when and where Vladimir Putin started his political career after his career in the KGB.

It is well known that Vladimir Putin has surrounded himself with people he trusts. And he trusts people who he has known for decades, especially people from the intelligence community, where he also has his roots. To refresh our memories, Vladimir Putin was a colonel of the KGB.

Well, Prigozhin sold hot dogs in St. Petersburg and suddenly he

got rich. At the same time where Vladimir Putin worked in St. Petersburg.

I will now make some assumptions here without evidence:

- Evgeny Prigozhin was recruited somehow by the KGB/FSB either during his prison time or during his “hot dog” time. Recruited for work within St. Petersburg’s underground structures.
- Due to his connections and maybe training by with/by the KGB/FSB, he was able to rise quickly from a hot dog seller to a restaurant chain owner and caterer.
- Vladimir Putin personally either had been in contact with Prigozhin during this time in St. Petersburg (until 1996), or had been briefed by certain agencies about his activities.
- Later, when Vladimir Putin became the President of Russia, Prigozhin was allowed to do the catering for state guests. This was only possible if Putin had some trust in him.

Hence, either Prigozhin was recruited as a civilian into the Russian intelligence agencies without additional training, or he received some kind of special training connected to the tasks he was given (whatever those tasks were). Even though I have no evidence, I’m entirely sure about this.

Given the fact that he was later given the public leadership of Wagner, there is a certain possibility that he received at least some basic military/intelligence training in the past. Of course, it would have been secret and you could not read about it anywhere. That’s how it works.

Russia copied a lot of “tools” the West created in the 90s and 00s for international power projection. One of those tools is private

military companies (PMC). A PMC could do Russia's work abroad without official involvement of the Russian state. It is something between a PMC like "Blackwater" and a state organization like the French foreign legion. The soldiers, however, are mainly Russians, recruited from the Russian armed forces and other agencies.

Wagner has been very successful in driving back imperial influence worldwide.

I would argue that Wagner has a public administration/face and a strict military one.

I would also argue that the organization is comparable to NATO. There is a public/civil administration in Brussels with public faces like Stoltenberg who have absolutely nothing to say, and then there are the American officers who are the real leaders of NATO, who give the orders and are in command.

Prigozhin is something like Stoltenberg. He is leading the public/civil administration of Wagner. But there are certain military commanders who are in charge of Wagner. And they report to Moscow.

We should remember that Artemovsk (Bakhmut) is a grinding operation. Its purpose is to suck in as many Ukrainian troops and as much equipment as possible in order to destroy them.

Therefore, sufficient space within the town must remain uncaptured. Furthermore, the approaches to Artemovsk need to be under tight control in order to regulate what is coming into the city, as well as to avoid envelopments and relief offensives by the enemy.

This is how Artemovsk has been used. Russian paratroopers took care of the flanks, and Wagner took care of the grinding within the

town.

Now you need to motivate your enemy to continue sending troops in, even though they get annihilated almost as soon as they enter. Hence, you should constantly provoke your opponent and dare him to send more troops to keep up a good fight. Appeal to his “man power”, etc.

This is what Prigozhin has been doing all the time.

Later, when there was a danger that Ukraine might abandon Artemovsk, Prigozhin changed his tactic and started to cry about ammunition and manpower losses. I do not want to imply that there are no troop losses or no lack of ammunition. This is certainly what you have in war: losses and struggles with equipment and supplies. But usually there is no way on earth that you would communicate that (except of course if you are a drug addicted president who is begging daily on TV for weapons).

I want to be straightforward. Nothing will happen within the Russian armed forces (and I count Wagner in here) that is not ordered by the general staff in Moscow. Nothing. Yet Prigozhin is not subordinated to the General Staff. The Wagner military commanders are, but not Prigozhin. He is the head of the civilian administration. Most likely he is directed by the Russian intelligence services.

I personally believe that Wagner indeed took a heavy beating within Artemovsk in the process of pushing forward. Especially during the Ukrainian counterattack (as opposed to counter OFFENSIVE) during the recent days in Artemovsk. [If you read my last article, then you know that Wagner is there especially to take the casualties in urban warfare on a volunteer basis.](#) And that they

would be endangered if a large-scale Ukrainian counteroffensive took place in the Artemovsk direction.

A few days ago, Prigozhin released a mad video where he was cursing and screaming with dozens of dead Wagner soldiers in the background. He cursed against everyone in the Russian military high command. I will neither post the video here nor link it.

This is extremely disrespectful against the fallen soldiers. I absolutely do not endorse such a behavior.

Nevertheless, there are many conceivable scenarios why such an event could happen:

- Part of a maskirovka/deception campaign by the GRU (the Russian military intelligence service), in order to show weakness and lure even more Ukrainians into Bakhmut, thinking that Wagner is close to being defeated. Coincidentally, Russia started 24 hours later a massive incendiary artillery barrage and aerial bombardment of the remaining parts of Artemovsk in Ukrainian hands. Maybe it was really just a coincidence. Maybe many Ukrainians were lured in by this announcement and died on the spot. Who knows?
- Confuse the Ukrainians with their counteroffensive plans, to divert forces away from the main direction. Assuming that Artemovsk is not the main direction.
- Prigozhin could have spent too much time with the soldiers and the casualties on the ground. If you do such a thing, there is a high possibility that you tend to ally yourself with the soldiers and forget to “lead”. Considering Prigozhin’s past, I’d say he is not the type of guy who would become “soft”.

- He simply could have been very angry that Wagner will be replaced in Artemovsk. At this time, he should already know that his PMC will be replaced by another unit/formation. He has no say in this. He can neither withdraw Wagner nor anything else. If he would try to, he would suddenly “commit suicide” by jumping out of a window of a high-rise building. Every strategic thing that happens militarily on the ground is decided in Moscow, and nowhere else.
- Prigozhin is not a team player. He is a manager. And discipline and the chain of command works differently in business than in the military. What we see here could also be an expression of the lack of discipline and respect for the chain of command.
- His tirade could have been some kind of preparation to ramp up PR activities around Wagner for the time after Ukraine. Wagner didn't get a beating and casualties because of the enemy, no, it got the casualties because they simply did not have enough ammunition. (Russian style PR, not the very best in the world 😊)

I don't know which one is the most probable. Maybe several of them at once?

Under any circumstances, we can say that Wagner did an extremely good job in Artemovsk. They are obviously heroes.

Wagner is not a big force. Some say there are approximately 10,000 people in total. Note that they always get fresh recruits. Even during combat when they suffer heavy losses.

I personally would argue that there is a danger to Wagner's core cohesion. They most likely lost many of their core officers (lower levels and staff sergeants) on the ground. Even though they always get new recruits, you cannot substitute that loss of

experience, “spirit”, and leadership in the short term. [I wrote extensively about that here.](#)

Hence, to rest and refit Wagner, to be able to use it in future conflicts worldwide I assume that Moscow decided to pull them out. They will get some rest in the rear. Will they be used further on in the conflict? Maybe yes, I don’t know.

The Russian army clearly takes over the perimeter. Ramzan Kadyrov will have the command obviously. Maybe Mikhail Mizintsev as well. They already jointly stormed Mariupol, for example. They have the advantage that they do not have the personal and equipment restrictions like Wagner. Nevertheless, there is also the possibility that Mizintsev will leave with Wagner to take over the re-training after their rest.

Now comes the big question:

“Aleks, you wrote recently that Russia will not do a direct force-on-force engagement with the Ukrainian army. They use PMCs for that.”

Yes. That’s absolutely true.

Bakhmut was a grinding operation. The enemy has been allowed to exist within the town. I assume, and we have already seen, that the remaining Ukrainians will be bombed out of the town. There are no civilians left. Russia has ever more freedom in the skies to conduct bombing operations. Wagner is there (presumably) until May 10th, and there is a possibility that all fighting that is needed on the ground could potentially be concluded by then. I do not know whether that will be achievable or not.

The Chechens, moreover, are not part of the Russian army. They

are part of the interior ministry. This is significant when we talk about casualties of the Russian army. I don't like this accounting trick. But there it is.

Last but not least there is the "attempt on Putin"; the drone strike on the Kremlin. It is possible that the security council of Russia could have decided to implement a more aggressive approach to bring the war to an end. I don't know. That remains to be seen.

My assumption is that Prigozhin is a Russian intelligence asset and that he has (had?) the trust and backing of President Putin himself and the Russian intelligence community. I would bet on GRU, but who knows? If his video performance was maskirovka, then he surely will now be prepared with his men for further engagements. Either in Ukraine or abroad.

If he really screwed things up, then he will now suffer the consequences. I don't think about death or such things. He did a lot for Russia. But something that might hurt his ego a lot. I don't want to speculate here.

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