

# SCANDAL IN MOSCOW OVER THE ELITE RIDICULING PUTIN

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Farkhad Akhmedov



Losif Prigozhin

Moscow's high society

has been rocked by a scandal after a pair of prominent Vladimir Putin cronies were heard insulting the Russian despot.

Billionaire oligarch and former Russian senator Farkhad Akhmedov and high-profile Moscow music producer Iosif Prigozhin, both public supporters of Putin, have been accused of calling him 'Satan' and a 'dwarf'.

An audio recording of what is a 35-minute phone call between the wealthy pair was posted on Telegram Messenger, then shared by Ukraine's Channel Five and quickly jumped on by other outlets – as well as Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).

In the audio clip, the pair are heard eviscerating Putin's invasion of Ukraine, slamming his Kremlin entourage over their failings, and even insulting his height.

Any public criticism of Putin in Russia is rare – not least among those who have benefited most from his consolidation of power. Those found guilty of insulting the Russian state, its army, or Putin himself face fines and even jail time.

Since its release, several Ukrainian and independent Russian outlets – including Meduza– have analyzed the audio recording that is understood to have been made on January 24. They have broken down the transcript.

According to Meduza, Akhmedov is heard saying the Russian government 'f\*\*\*ed us, our children, their future, their destiny,' in reference to Putin's war in Ukraine.

'He's Satan,' he adds, referring to the Russian dictator, before also criticizing the deputy head of the Russia's Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, who was also Russian president for four years from 2008 to 2012.

'Both this one [Putin] and the second [Medvedev] are notorious. Lilliputians are f\*\*\*ing undergrown,

notorious,' Akhmedov is heard saying, Meduza reports.

Putin – who often wears high-platform shoes – is known to be deeply sensitive about his diminutive 5ft 7inch height – with claims he suffers from 'Napoleon complex'. Medvedev, at 5ft 4 inches, is even smaller than his boss.

On the invasion, Prigozhin, 53, bemoans that Russian authorities are losing to 'Kvartal 95' – the name of the production company founded by Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky in 2003, while he was still an actor and entertainer.

Most leading figures inside the company joined Zelensky's administration after he became president. Zelensky and his close allies have been credited with many of Ukraine's successes, particularly in the court of public opinion.

Prigozhin says that Putin should just pull his forces out of Ukraine and give up. 'He [Putin] got himself into it,' Prigozhin is heard telling Akhmedov, Meduza reports. 'To be honest, f\*\*k it, I would stop, get the Nobel Prize, and f\*\*king leave. I gave up the country anyway, damn it,' he added.

Akhmedov disputes this, telling his friend that 'it will be a long time, unfortunately' before Putin decides to pull his armies out of the neighboring country.

In the audio clip, the two high-profile figures are heard eviscerating Putin's invasion of Ukraine, slamming his Kremlin entourage over their failings, and insulting his height

'He won't go back, he can't go forward. He will be like this,' he says, suggesting that he believes the war in Ukraine will continue to drag on for years.

According to Meduza, swearing is a constant throughout the phone call. It says that the F-word is said 157 times in the recording.

The call which first appeared on Telegram has caused a sensation in Russia despite the story being censored by the state media – as it appears to show that Putin's main cheerleaders are privately contemptuous of him and his war.

The voice sounding identical to Prigozhin – no relation of the head of Wagner private army who has the same surname – says on the call that the elite 'blame [Russian defense minister Sergei] Shoigu' for everything. 'Behind his back they call him a mother\*\*\*\*\*. Their task is to knock him down, but they are not doing it yet.... Because somebody must be blamed for [the chaos].'

In his raging diatribe, Prigozhin slams one of Putin's oldest and closest KGB cronies Sergey Chemezov, now head of hi-tech giant Rostec, a key military supplier.

'The \*\*\*\*\* is responsible for the military-industrial complex and doesn't give a \*\*\*\*\*. They are the most \*\*\*\*\* up people in the world. 'My opinion is they behave like kings, like Gods, I can't say a single good word about them. They are \*\*\*\*\*.'

Akhmedov says there is 'collective guilt' at the top of Russia. 'They at the top are each responsible for their own sector, and they \*\*\*\*\* them all. 'Not a good one left. [Putin] used to say the army was the key thing, and

it turned out there was no army, too.'

Putin believed he had a competent fighting machine but his circle 'fooled him, they fooled him, they've been fooling him.

They live in their own reality, in their own world with their ex- secretaries as wives, and behave like they are special.

Everything is just so \*\*\*\*\* up.'

Akhmedov asks if Putin and his circle can cling on.

'I don't know,' replies Prigozhin.

Soon after attention was drawn to the conversion, Prigozhin desperately claimed that the recording had been generated by 'neural networks,' Meduza reports. On March 26, he published a video message. 'Fake audio recording with supposedly my voice and a conversation with an influential person. I want to say that today's technologies, neural networks, allow you to fake not only a voice, but also a conversation,' he said.

He later admitted that some phrases in the conversation were genuine, saying in an interview that he 'doesn't exactly remember' the conversation. 'People in a private conversation can talk about anything. The main thing is that you speak in practice and how you behave in life and in different circumstances,' he said, according to Meduza. He said he last spoke to Akhmedov in January.

Prigozhin admitted that he was afraid the of consequences that he could face in light of the audio recording, and said that while he and Akhmedov maybe have spoken some of the phrases heard in the recording, they have been altered.

He added that he treats Putin with the utmost respect, saying he is a figure of a 'planetary scale' and said that he would not flee Moscow.

Journalists contested Prigozhin's suggestion that the clip was fake. Independent TV station chief Vadim Vostrov insisted: 'This can neither be faked nor compiled.' The 'intonations and nuances' made clear this was a genuine recording.

'I know that many representatives of the so-called ruling class, from [MPs] to governors, discuss similar things and in approximately the same terms.'

There was 'so much offensive for Putin personally' in the call, he said.

Journalist Dmitry Kolezev said the recording appeared 'genuine' with 'many details that are very difficult to invent and fake' with precise voice matches and 'manner of communication'.

*'For the first time we have heard what some members of the Russian elite really think and feel,' he said. 'They hate Putin, they are fully aware of the scale of the disaster and they understand that the country has no future with Putin.'*

*'At the same time, they are frightened, not ready to do something themselves, and in fact they are simply waiting for the regime to collapse.'*

He warned of retribution by Putin, especially over the slur on his height.

‘In their place, I would urgently evacuate myself and loved ones from Russia (if not already) and not think about returning in the coming years,’ he said.

Pro-Kremlin Ukrainian blogger Anatoly Shariy said the conversation was ‘real’ and he has known about it for two weeks. He called Prigozhin’s denial ‘funny’.

‘The recording was made in Akhmedov’s room. Speaker phones are evil.’

Akhmedov – who like Prigozhin was sanctioned by the West for his links to Putin – did not initially comment on the recording.

Meanwhile, Yevgeny Prigozhin – founder of the Wagner private military company which has been fighting in Ukraine – quickly moved to ensure that there was no case of mistaken identity between him and his namesake Iosif Prigozhin.

‘It is possible that those people who carried out this special operation and who posted this conversation could think that I was talking,’ he said, Meduza reported

He said he was more softly spoken than Iosif.

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*Chris Jewers and Will Stewart cover Russia for the London Daily Mail.*

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