

# WAGNER PMC EXEMPLIFIES HOW PUTIN HAS DESTROYED RUSSIAN STATE

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*[I have known Paul Goble since*

*we worked together on Soviet issues when he was a chief analyst at the RAND Corporation in the 1980s. In the years since, he's had an exceedingly distinguished career in academia, diplomacy, and scholarship, particularly in regard to Russia and the former Soviet space. He knows whereof he speaks. –JW]*

Russian President Vladimir Putin has long promoted himself as the man who rebuilt the power of the Russian state after the chaos of the 1990s.

However, the Wagner Group mutiny highlights why that rings false—not only because it was an armed challenge to Putin's authority but also because the relationship between the Kremlin leader and Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner “private military company” (PMC), is a model of how Putin has dealt with others in the Russian political elite across the board.

In case after case, the Russian president has destroyed the institutions of the Russian state and replaced them with others based on personal ties and private understandings, a situation that has led some observers to describe the Putin regime as a failed state.

This in turn amplifies worries about the coming post-Putin transition, where the absence of institutions linked together by law and transparent practice could easily lead to a war of all against all in which force alone will determine the outcome. (For a magisterial discussion of this, see Janusz Bugajski, *Failed State: A Guide to Russia's Rupture*, 2022).

Most Western commentaries on the Wagner uprising have focused on the events themselves rather than on the ways in which the actions of both Prigozhin and Putin act as an X-ray into the inner workings of the current Russian system of power.

On the contrary, an increasing number of Russian observers are focusing on precisely this aspect of the situation. (See, for example, Novayagazeta.eu, June 27; Reform.io; Svoboda; Kasparov.ru, July 2). Perhaps the most thoughtful and comprehensive of these analyses is offered by Ilya Matveev, a Russian scholar who now teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, on the *Important Stories* portal (Istories.media, June 27).

He argues that Prigozhin's PMC and its actions are not some outlier in the Russian landscape as many think but rather highlight the ways in which, as a result of Putin's pursuit of a personalist dictatorship, such organizations have displaced not only the Russian military but effectively destroyed the Russian state as such.

*According to Matveev, what most people even now continue to refer to as the Russian state is in fact one giant set of privatized and semi-privatized institutions that are related to one another and to the Kremlin on the basis of that reality rather than according to the traditional norms of a functioning state.*

When Putin became president, the Russian scholar says, he declared that "Russia needs strong state power and must have it"; however, over the 23 years of his rule, Putin has weakened the state both in terms of its monopoly on the use of violence and its status as a single entity effectively controlled by a single center.

As a result, Matveev continues, Putin's much-ballyhooed "power vertical" has turned out "to be as fragile as a porcelain cup"—and this has happened not because of some tectonic shift but as the direct result of Putin's actions.

The Kremlin leader wanted to modernize the Russian economy but "did not trust either private business or, what is if anything more important, the state itself." Consequently, Putin turned to the formation of "state corporations" that occupied a gray zone between the two and then extended the principles on which they were put together to other parts of the political system.

Thus, Matveev continues, "'statism' in Putin's version is not a commitment to the Weberian ideal of a rational, meritocratic corps of bureaucrats but rather to an ideology of specifically understood 'national interests' for the implementation of which all means are good and formalities are of little importance."

Under these arrangements, personal loyalty to Putin became everything and loyalty to the state ever-less important.

That in turn has led to a situation in which state corporations, and the PMCs that are a subset of them, often resisted the demands of the state, typically in non-violent ways but now by violent means as well. Putin did this "because his main task was the support of a regime of personal power" rather than the creation of a powerful state as such.

Yet, paradoxically, the Russian scholar argues, "the strengthening of the political regime (that is, the regime of Putin's personal power) led to a weakening of the state"—and the converse would be true as well, making any future transition difficult for a leader seeking to build his own power.

Citing the work of British scholar Neil Robinson, Matveev says that it is quite possible to distinguish in the

Russian case between state building and regime building and to see clearly how the pursuit of one can lead to the weakening of the other.

Except since the very start of his rule, Putin has focused on the latter rather than the former—and the result is the Prigozhin mutiny, “which revealed the weakness of the Russian state” that Putin’s own policies have generated.

“Behind the monolithic façade of Putinism are clans, networks and corporations pursuing their own goals and quite capable of bringing the country to collapse and civil war,” asserts Matveev. Indeed, it is instructive that the revolt of one of these entities was contested by another—that of Ramzan Kadyrov’s Chechen forces.

Any movement toward democracy will involve the disorganization of the state as happened in the 1990s, he argues. “But only a democratic transition can ultimately lead to the emergence of a strong, capable state in Russia”. Putin was right in 1999; but since then, he has done everything but follow his own understanding in the hopes of maximizing his own power.

Many remain reluctant to speak of Russia as a failed state because some components of the Russian political system remain strong.

However, this hesitation misses the point that a failed state is not one without powerful players, but rather a political system without a controlling center, and, if the personalist dictator holding things together passes from the scene, the lack of such institutionalization can prove fatal.

(On that critical distinction and the need to make it in the Russian case, see my article, “Russia as a Failed State: Domestic Difficulties and Foreign Challenges,” 2004.)

As Putin’s power ebbs in the wake of the Prigozhin mutiny and because his aging (he turns 72 in October) has elevated concerns about what he will leave behind, the fact that the Kremlin leader has destroyed rather than rebuilt the Russian state will become ever-more central to discussions about the future of the Russian Federation.

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