

**After Prigozhin meets with military brass & talks with Lukashenko,
Wagner troops stop advance on Moscow & return to the war.
And Prigozhin gets a one-way ticket to Belarus.**



Yevgeny Prigozhin, center, with Deputy Defense Minister Col. Gen. Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and First Deputy Head of the Main Directorate of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Vladimir Alekseev in Rostov on Saturday.

In a video interview Friday, Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose private military company, the Wagner Group, has been deeply involved in Russia's war in Ukraine and played a major role in the long battle for Bakhmut, issued an extraordinary rant against the leadership of the ministry of defense, accusing it of attacking a Wagner camp and killing a large number of Wagner troops. He claimed the Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, and the Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, had scrambled warplanes to strike the Wagner forces and they were being attacked by rockets, helicopter gunships and artillery. He said Shoigu had arrived in Rostov-on-Don, where the headquarters of the Russian forces operating in eastern Ukraine are located, "to conduct an operation to destroy Wagner PMC. He used artillerymen and helicopter pilots undercover to destroy us." Friday night some of Prigozhin's troops entered Russia and took over the military headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, and Saturday morning, in a video filmed in the courtyard of the military headquarters, he said, "We're blockading the city of Rostov and going to Moscow... This is not a military coup but a march of justice." He demanded to see Shoigu and Gerasimov and said, "We will destroy anyone who stands in our way. We are moving forward and will go to the end."

Early Saturday morning, the National Anti-Terrorism Committee, which is part of the Federal Security Services (FSB), charged Prigozhin with organizing an armed

insurrection and urged the Wagner Group forces to arrest him and resist his “criminal and treacherous orders.” It said his statements were a “stab in the back to Russian troops” and amounted to fomenting an armed conflict in Russia. President Putin spoke on television Saturday morning to all Russians, including “those who were dragged into this criminal adventure through deceit or threats and pushed onto the path of a grave crime – an armed mutiny.... Any actions that split our nation are essentially a betrayal of our people, of our comrades-in-arms who are now fighting at the frontline. This is a knife in the back of our country and our people. What we are facing is essentially a betrayal. Inflated ambitions and personal interests have led to treason – treason against our country, our people and the common cause which Wagner Group soldiers and commanders were fighting and dying for shoulder to shoulder, together with our other units and troops.... Our actions to defend the Fatherland from this threat will be harsh. All those who have consciously chosen the path of betrayal, planned an armed mutiny and taken the path of blackmail and terrorism, will inevitably be punished and will answer before the law and our people. The Armed Forces and other government agencies have received the necessary orders.”

Prigozhin didn't get to Moscow and didn't get to speak with Shoigu and Gerasimov. But as his troops moved northward toward Moscow on the M4, he did get to meet in Rostov with their deputies – Lt. Gen. Vladimir Alekseev, the First Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff, Gerasimov's deputy, and Deputy Defense Minister Col. Gen. Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, Shoigu's deputy. Meanwhile, as the Wagner forces continued to move toward Moscow, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, who knows Prigozhin, was in contact with Putin and arranged a deal in which, in exchange for agreeing that the Wagner Group would stop its advance toward Moscow and return to its camps in Ukraine and that he would reside in Belarus, the charges against Prigozhin would be dropped. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov later announced that “an agreement was reached that PMC Wagner troops would return to their camps and places of deployment. Some of them, if they wish to do so, can later ink contracts with the Defense Ministry. It applies to fighters who decided against taking part in this ‘armed mutiny’.” As part of the arrangement, Russia agreed not to prosecute the Wagner troops who took part in the advance because of their “combat merits.”

Yesterday, in an 11-minute audio message, Prigozhin said he had not intended to overthrow the regime when he directed his troops to move toward Moscow: “We went as a demonstration of protest, not to overthrow the government of the country. Our march showed many things we discussed earlier: the serious problems with security in the country.” He said he had acted “to prevent the destruction of the Wagner private military company” and in response to an attack on a Wagner camp that had killed some 30 fighters. He said he regretted his troops had shot down Russian aircraft that had fired on them. And he said, of his march toward Moscow, “We halted at the moment when the first assault unit deployed its artillery (near Moscow), conducted reconnaissance, and realized that a lot of blood would be spilled.” He didn't say where he was. But he did say that Lukashenko had offered to let Wagner operate under a legal framework.

Russian news agencies meanwhile reported that, in a reversal of the earlier decision to drop the criminal case, that it has not in fact been closed.

Last night, Putin addressed the citizens of Russia again and thanked them for their “restraint, cohesion and patriotism. This civic solidarity shows that any blackmail, any attempt to stage domestic turmoil is doomed to fail...I will emphasise that all necessary decisions to neutralize the emerged threat and protect the constitutional system, the life and security of our citizens were made instantly, from the very beginning of the events. An armed mutiny would have been suppressed in any event.” He also expressed his gratitude to “those Wagner Group soldiers and commanders who had taken the right decision, the only one possible – they chose not to engage in fratricidal bloodshed and stopped before reaching the point of no return.” To those troops he said, “Today, you have the opportunity to continue your service to Russia by signing a contract with the Defence Ministry or other law enforcement or security agency or return home. Those who want to are free to go to Belarus.” Finally, he said, “I am grateful to President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko for his efforts and contribution to the peaceful settlement of the situation.”

Very early this morning a business jet with identification matching a jet linked to Prigozhin left Rostov and landed near Minsk, the capital of Belarus, two hours later. Lukashenko was quoted by the state news agency as saying, “I see Prigozhin is already flying in on this plane. Yes, indeed, he is in Belarus today.” Today, the FSB announced that the criminal case against Prigozhin for “organizing an armed mutiny” has been closed. But his problems may not be over. This morning, speaking to soldiers at a meeting in the Kremlin, Putin said the Wagner Group had received 86 billion rubles (about \$1 billion) from the defense ministry over the past year and Prigozhin’s catering company had received another 80 billion in state contracts for food for the Russian army. Putin said, “I do hope that, as part of this work, no one stole anything or, let’s say, stole less, but we will, of course, investigate all of this.”

David R. Cameron
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