

After Armed Rebellion, Putin Tries to Reinforce His Defenses

Long focused on security, the Russian president is rewarding loyalty among the ruling elite and showering his most important constituency — the men with guns — with cash.



By Anton Troianovski

July 4, 2023 Updated 12:58 p.m. ET

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia is said to work out of identically constructed offices at multiple residences so that photographs don't reveal his location.

His assistants undergo such a rigorous selection process that a former bodyguard once called them “a caste of chosen people.”

And more than three years after the pandemic's beginning, the Kremlin has continued to enforce a “clean zone” around the president, requiring many who come near him to quarantine for days.

For decades, people who know him say, Mr. Putin has been remarkably focused on his personal security and on preventing rivals from using the powers of government against him. Now, in the aftermath of last month's short-lived rebellion led by Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner private mercenary group that fought for Russia in Ukraine, Mr. Putin appears to be scrambling to coup-proof his system once more.

He is rewarding loyalty among the ruling elite and showering his most important constituency — the men with guns — with cash. And, so far, he has avoided the sort of large-scale purge that other authoritarian leaders have carried out in response to coup attempts or rebellions, perhaps to avoid destabilizing his system further.

“The president is acting very rationally,” said Ekaterina Schulmann, a Russian political scientist. “He is focused on his personal and political survival, and he's ready for anything to accomplish that.”

She noted that, for the moment, despite Mr. Putin's reputation for ruthlessness, his response to the failed rebellion appears to be all carrot rather than stick — as evidenced last week by a lavish Kremlin ceremony honoring security forces, and by an official government decree granting a 10.5 percent raise to soldiers, police officers and other security agency employees.



Russian soldiers listening to a speech by Mr. Putin at the Kremlin last month. Sergei Guneyev/ Sputnik, via Associated Press

Ms. Schulmann posited that “the system is too emaciated and fragile to indulge in any large-scale repressions” in response to the rebellion.

Some argue that, so far, Mr. Putin's handling of the mutiny has left him in a strengthened position. He has removed Mr. Prigozhin as a destabilizing factor in Russia's invasion force in Ukraine and he has forced the military, the security forces and members of the ruling elite to declare their loyalty to him anew.

But analysts say they believe that Mr. Putin will face new threats, especially as he continues to empower a patchwork security apparatus composed of different interests and power centers. On Tuesday, Russia suffered yet another embarrassment when several drones were intercepted in the Moscow region, the latest in a series of aerial attacks on Russia's capital for which the Kremlin has blamed Ukraine.

"Short term, Putin has achieved a win here," said Grigorii Golosov, a professor of political science at the European University at St. Petersburg. "But, in the long term, this is a destabilizing situation."

Over his 23 years in power, Mr. Putin has handed control of some of the state's most important assets to longtime friends and has placed former bodyguards and other loyalists in key government positions. The agency whose main mission is to protect him and other top officials, the Federal Protective Service, is a force numbering in the tens of thousands that has also taken on a growing role in monitoring other Russian security agencies for potential plots against the president.

A defector last year from the agency, known as the F.S.O. by its Russian initials, described a sprawling organization that includes a Biological Safety Center that inspects the president's food. Mr. Putin is believed to pay close attention to his security arrangements; asked about his safety in an interview released in 2017, Mr. Putin responded that Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader, had told him that he had survived many assassination attempts "because I was always the one to deal with my security personally."



Yevgeny V. Prigozhin found fans in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, during his rebellion in late June. He was allowed by Mr. Putin to find shelter and safety in Belarus. Associated Press

Since the mutiny, Mr. Putin's actions have highlighted his cold calculations aimed at maintaining his own security and his grip on power. To stop the rebellion on June 24, Mr. Putin made a compromise, allowing Mr. Prigozhin and his fighters to find shelter safely in Belarus even after they had shot down multiple Russian aircraft, seized a city of a million people and marched to within 125 miles of Moscow.

Then, Mr. Putin showered his security forces with praise, holding a ceremony in the Kremlin's hallowed Cathedral Square, honoring the troops' "resolve and courage," with even the traffic police in attendance. To show his love for the people at a time of crisis, Mr. Putin appeared to violate his own Covid-19 precautions in public for the first time: He ventured into an adoring crowd in southern Russia to clasp hands and even kissed a young woman on the forehead.

Although Mr. Putin is known to take his time in plotting against his foes, there have also been no confirmed arrests of people who may have had a hand in the mutiny or of people close to Mr. Prigozhin. It is a marked contrast to the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan emptied his country's prisons to make room for more than 40,000 detainees.

Speculation has swirled over the fate of Gen. Sergei Surovikin, a senior military official close to the mercenary chief. While some reports, including preliminary ones from American officials, said he might have been detained or arrested, several close observers of Mr. Putin's system predicted that if the general had been held for questioning, he would soon be let go.

Arresting generals "would throw the army into disarray," said a person who has known Mr. Putin for decades, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he feared repercussions for discussing sensitive matters.

The apparent caution was yet another indication that Mr. Putin, despite the striking anger he showed over what he called Mr. Prigozhin's "betrayal," is reaching for a familiar toolbox to maintain power.



Gen. Sergei Surovikin, left, and Defense Minister Sergei K. Shoigu during a meeting with Mr. Putin last year. Gavriil Grigorov/Sputnik, via Associated Press

The raise for soldiers and law-enforcement personnel had been previously announced, but Ms. Schulmann, the political scientist, said it didn't seem coincidental that it was made official days after the mutiny.

Mr. Putin also apparently pledged more weapons to one of his most loyal security chiefs. The head of the National Guard, Viktor Zolotov, a former Putin bodyguard, bragged last week that the president had promised to arm his forces with tanks and artillery.

And the Russian leader has telegraphed confidence in Defense Minister Sergei K. Shoigu, whose ouster Mr. Prigozhin had long demanded for problems on the battlefield, but who has worked for Mr. Putin ever since the president first took office in 1999. Mr. Shoigu spoke publicly about the rebellion for the first time on Monday in remarks carried by Russian state media, declaring: "These plans have failed because, above all, the personnel of the armed forces have stayed true to their covenant and military duty."

But rewarding the military and security services with more money and power carries its own risks. Mr. Golosov, the St. Petersburg political scientist, warned that other factions within them might be tempted to mount their own uprising, having witnessed Mr. Prigozhin's ability to launch one.

"It's quite possible that, looking at how the Prigozhin mutiny developed, some other players in the security services will see this as, let's say, a more plausible course of action for themselves than they did before the Prigozhin experience," Mr. Golosov said.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, analysts say, will act as a further destabilizing force. It was the battlefield role of Mr. Prigozhin's Wagner mercenary force that apparently prompted Mr. Putin to overlook the warlord's criticism of the war effort. Now, the Kremlin may face the challenge of waging war in Ukraine without parts of Wagner — and maintaining the balance in an increasingly fragile system.

It is a system that arose in peacetime, prioritizing loyalty over effectiveness, said Nikolay Petrov, a guest scholar at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin. But in war, the Kremlin needs both — and it is struggling to find players who are both effective and loyal, as the example of Mr. Prigozhin showed. That raises the possibility that Mr. Putin's renewed emphasis on loyalty in the aftermath of the mutiny could affect Russia's battlefield performance.

"Putin and his whole system now face a dilemma," Mr. Petrov said. "If you keep the principle of loyalty as more important than effectiveness, then there won't be the risks that were associated with the mutiny. But there won't be any hope for a more effective functioning of the system, either."



Russian police officers and a supporter of Mr. Putin's in Moscow last month. Maxim Shipenkov/EPA, via Shutterstock

Anton Troianovski is the Moscow bureau chief for The New York Times. He was previously Moscow bureau chief of The Washington Post and spent nine years with The Wall Street Journal in Berlin and New York.

More from Anton Troianovski



The U.S. asked Ukraine not to conduct covert attacks in Russia during the rebellion.

July 3, 2023



Mutiny Provided Glimpse of a Post-Putin Russia. Is the Window Still Open?

July 1, 2023