

# In Russia, has the fairytale author-turned-warlord just saved the king?

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**Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner army, once wrote kids' stories. What can they tell us about his 'March on Moscow'?**

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Russian Wagner mercenary group that launched an uprising against Vladimir Putin last month, once published a book of children's fairytales, as was reported by the [Moscow Times](#).

The book, called 'Indraguzik', was published in 2002 and told the adventures of little men in a world of big people. It started as a collection of bedtime stories for Prigozhin's two young children.

The volume is hard to reconcile with Prigozhin's current image as a brutal warlord who, [until his recent mutiny](#), owned a troll factory and the Wagner group, two entities that are prudently located outside the boundaries of legal and ethical regulation.

But some things remain unchanged: the book is made in the typical Prigozhin style, which is to say it systematically waives facts. Prigozhin doesn't appear as the author – his children, Polina and Pasha, do. He is credited as the illustrator, although [in a 2003 interview](#) he said he commissioned illustrations from two authors with different styles.

The first episodes of the story see the hero – a tiny boy, who lives with his equally small family in a chandelier – travel to the previously unknown world of 'big people': humans. Some readers may see disconcerting parallels in the fact that this story was penned when Prigozhin was a recently appointed caterer to the Russian president, his entry into political life.

The final scene contains important images; the hero returns to Indraguzia with a troop of friends and a stolen magic flute that can do 'anything'. There, he discovers that the king, who was bewitched many years before, is getting smaller every year. The once-great king's minions and guards lament his inevitable disappearance. The hero and his friends promise to save him. They use the magic flute, reversing the constant shrinking of the monarch. But they get carried away and make him so big that he breaks through the roof of the castle and asks to return to his previous size, so as not to crush his subjects. The hero grants his request. "This is a very dangerous toy," the king remarks, "maybe you can leave me the magic flute?" The troop agrees.

The king is saved from continuous weakening and disappearance but the story doesn't end there. Later, a boy from the human world who had visited the magical land wants to go home. His friends, as well as the king and all the kingdom's subjects are shocked. "How sorry we are to part with you!" they say. At this point, the boy offers to take them with him. With the help of the same flute, he enlarges all the inhabitants of the kingdom, allowing them to enter the normal, banal world. Every one of them ends up getting a dog, always named Tuzik.

It would be strange to read a 20-year-old children's fairytale as a foretelling of the recent power

struggle in Russia or to suggest it signals the struggle will end in the miraculous rescue of the king and the establishment of a totalitarian order where even dogs are uniform.

But in this fairytale, the motivation of the author is clearly visible. Aside from his fondness for trickery and desire for a magical power that can be used over a country's ruler, Prigozhin is not without loyalty. Indeed, in the penultimate chapter, the hero saves the weakening king and gives him the flute that has the power to mould reality. The small, ordinary boy becomes big, empowering himself with a stolen flute, while the great king's power rapidly diminishes and he disappears; in a sense, they become mirror images of each other.

Prigozhin and Vladimir Putin have come to mirror each other, too, though their evolving symmetry has taken place over a 20-year period. In 2002, Prigozhin, an outsider, looked in awe and admiration at the magical land of the Kremlin. In 2022, Putin triggered a competition between entities responsible for armed violence, a field long dominated by Prigozhin. Wagner's leader had been using his rogue magic flute, a private army, to make the king big for over a year. Prior to that, he waged a war to make Putin big in virtual space, acting as [a subcontractor providing fake news](#) and manipulating public opinion.

By the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, Prigozhin was the most influential warlord on contract with Russia's state administration. 23 June, when Prigozhin, a private military contractor, vowed to 'march on Moscow', was seemingly when he cut all ties with his client, the state, and organised Russia's second coup d'état in as many years.

Why call it a second coup? The first was on 24 February 2022 and was carried out by Putin himself. He let go of any pretence that there were checks and balances in place and decided almost entirely on his own to invade a neighbouring state. He upset the balance of power among Russia's ruling circles and crossed the line that separated him, as head of a bureaucratic state, from a military prince or a warlord. Abandoning political moderation and the rhetoric of 'healthy' conservatism, the president and his inner circle switched to the language of far-right niche publicists and supporters of the 2014 '[Russian Spring](#)'. That is, rather than a military or far-right putsch, Putin himself began the rupture in the Kremlin's line of succession.

Is it correct to read Prigozhin's 'march for justice' as an attempt at a full-fledged coup d'état, considering everything that made this rebellion unusual: the army's decision not to fire against Wagner troops despite having had the chance, as well as how quickly it was called off and seemingly without repercussions for Prigozhin? If we return to the hero's motives in our fairytale, it cannot be ruled out that the hero of this story agreed to 'leave the magic flute to the king'. That is to say, Prigozhin might have agreed to render his private army to Putin's Ministry of Defence on the terms of an amnesty that was immediately proclaimed, with some Wagner integration into Russian army ranks starting after the march, as has been [tentatively reported](#).

If one explores a not-completely-implausible hypothesis that the march was partly consented with Putin's entourage, possibly in anticipation of a real coup d'état, to re-rally the establishment and get rid of the critical disloyalty of the state bureaucracy to the president-turned-military prince.

This scenario is somewhat likely, given Putin had recently taken demonstrative steps to opt out of Prigozhin's model of competitive violence and to restore the state monopoly on it. Through a spokesman, [the president stated](#) weeks before the mutiny that the main goal of the invasion of Ukraine had "largely" been achieved and [demanded private armies](#) submit to the Ministry of Defence, repeatedly confirming the priority of the state army command in managing the war. In other words, Putin is attempting to create a centralised, bureaucratic model of violence, possibly to move towards a drawn-out, frozen war in which Russia keeps at least part of the occupied territories

in Ukraine.

For Putin, this may signal a return from the role of military prince to that of president, accompanied by a new balance of power around him. The bureaucrats are starting to reassert themselves, a process that was interrupted by the invasion of Ukraine and the undeclared state of emergency. But given the tragic year and a half of war and the crackdown that has taken place against civil society and mass migration in Russia, the Russian state will not be the same as before and will abandon the spirit of compromise of the 2010s.

Over the past decade – but particularly since the start of the war in Ukraine – Russia has regressed [to a neo-mercantilist model of government](#), one that is connected to colonial wars, as the goals of the trade balance and financial protectionism are accompanied with a strive for territorial expansion. For the country's elite, this has upset the balance between national (and even nationalist) interests and international ties. From 2012 onwards, promoters of international collaboration and interdependence in economy, such as Russia's former finance minister, [Alexei Kudrin](#), were considerably downgraded or moved out from the higher ranks; international academic collaborations were progressively devalorised and [criminalised](#); and even Westernised propaganda managers, such as Putin's former political adviser, [Gleb Pavlovsky](#), were replaced by those 'domestically' baked, like Prigozhin himself.

The construction of a new, militarised bureaucratic loyalty creates space for opportunities for different groups of the population. Those who perceive the state solely through the prism of competition between elite cliques and clans tend to overlook this post-Prigozhin shift. For them, the Kremlin's attraction to bureaucratic routine is a meaningless charade or another sign of Putin's weakness. But in doing so, they fail to ask the important questions: in whose hands will the instruments of violence end up, and what conditions will limit their use? Civil peace, the safety of activists campaigning on politics, the rights of LGBTIQ people and minorities, as well as the end of the war in Ukraine, all depend on the answers.

In Prigozhin's fairytale, having first agreed to leave the magic flute to the king, the hero responds to a tearful call from Indraguzia the next day, returning to use it to enlarge all the king and his subjects and take them with him to the land of big people. Again, it would be an exaggeration to look for direct parallels between reality and children's fairytales. But, if we accept that Wagner's partial integration into the Russian forces is reminiscent of the episode that saw the hero of the fairytale return the magic flute to the king, then it's worth wondering whether Prigozhin's loyalty to Russia comes with a desire to catapult the Russian people into a monotonous routine where everyone has the same dog.

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Open Democracy

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/prigozhin-kremlin-uprising-fairytale/>