

Why did Lukashenka invite Wagner rebels to Belarus?

Tuesday 25 July 2023, by [ILYASH Igor](#) (Date first published: 13 July 2023).

Lukashenka's role as an unlikely peace broker during Wagner's failed rebellion has brought him both hope and danger

The Wagner group's [abortive 'march on Moscow'](#) last month gave Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka a unique opportunity to strengthen his position in relation to the Kremlin and improve his image.

But if Belarus is really to become a [new base for Russian mercenaries](#), as the Belarusian defence ministry said on 11 July, it could destroy the dictatorship's monopoly on violence. It could also create colossal risks for Belarus as a whole.

Since the dictatorship in Belarus survived the [dramatic 2020 protests](#) – largely thanks to the Kremlin's support – Lukashenka has repeatedly told his supporters that their future is now inextricably linked with the fate of [Vladimir Putin](#). He [believes](#) Russia's collapse would lead to “[his government] not being there tomorrow”, which suggests he saw the Wagner uprising as a direct threat to his own rule.

On 24 June, the morning after Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin began his rebellion, Lukashenka gave the order to bring the Belarusian army to [full combat readiness](#). “This turmoil would immediately spread to Belarus,” Lukashenka later explained.

In parallel, it appears that the Belarusian leader offered Putin his services as an intermediary in negotiations with Prigozhin, although the Russian president seemed to have little faith in their success. “Listen, Sasha [Lukashenka's nickname], it's useless,” Lukashenka [said](#) Putin told him at the time. “[Prigozhin] doesn't even pick up the phone, he doesn't want to talk to anyone”.

As the armoured vehicles of Prigozhin's mutinous mercenaries rolled towards Moscow on 24 June, putting Russia on edge, the Belarusian authorities were in no hurry to communicate about the unfolding events. The only official statement appeared in the afternoon that day and was issued [on behalf of](#) the Security Council of Belarus.

The message was very neutral; the council did not publicly support Putin and did not condemn the actions of the rebels, but stressed that internal confrontation was inadmissible and called for “the voice of reason” to prevail. Apparently, Lukashenka had little interest in who was right or wrong, but was keen for Russia to remain strong enough to guarantee the safety of his regime in Belarus.

It would have been difficult to find a better intermediary. Negotiations between the Kremlin and Prigozhin lasted nearly a whole day. On the evening of 24 June, it was [announced](#) that agreement had been reached to stop the rebels' movement against Moscow, as well as “further steps towards de-escalation”.

A PR triumph

[Speaking on 27 June](#) June to a military audience, Lukashenka portrayed himself as Russia's saviour, someone who had prevented unrest and civil war. According to this version of events, he first convinced Putin not to kill Prigozhin, and then convinced the head of the Wagner Group to stop his march on Moscow.

Indeed, if you take Lukashenka at his word, he became Russia's de facto head of state during the mutiny, giving direct orders to Alexander Bortnikov, head of the country's Federal Security Service (FSB), threatening to dispatch a brigade of the Belarusian Armed Forces to Moscow to deal with Prigozhin, and then giving the rebels personal security guarantees. "Trouble was thus averted," he concluded.

The Belarusian leader's claimed role in halting Prigozhin's 'march on Moscow' has really helped his image

It is difficult to say how much of Lukashenka's account corresponds to reality. Some analysts have [expressed scepticism](#) that he played as big a role in the negotiations with Wagner as was claimed in statements from Minsk and Moscow. But, regardless, the Belarusian leader's claimed role in halting Prigozhin's 'march on Moscow' has really helped his image.

In the year and a half since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, doubts have been raised about Belarus's independence vis-à-vis its powerful neighbour. When Putin's promise of police backing saved Lukashenka from a popular uprising over falsified election results last year, [Lukashenka had to explain](#) to supporters more than once that he was still running Belarus, not Putin. Prigozhin's uprising offered him an opportunity to demonstrate that not only does he rule Belarus, he is even able to influence the situation in Russia.

The fact that neither Putin nor Prigozhin have spoken about the actual process of negotiation has allowed Lukashenka to present his own version of what took place – and to win on the propaganda front. While Putin's post-mutiny speech focused on the "highest consolidation" of Russian society and the fact a rebellion would inevitably fail, Lukashenka's rhetoric looked more convincing and better suited to that particular moment.

Going to Belarus?

It's worth noting that Lukashenka's role in the whole Wagner affair was not limited to that of an intermediary.

On the evening of 24 June, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [said](#) that Prigozhin, founder of the Wagner Group, would now "leave [Russia] for Belarus". Two days later, it became clear in Putin's address to the Russian people that Wagner mercenaries had also been offered the opportunity to go to Belarus. They were also given the option of signing a contract with the Russian defence ministry, or going home.

On the same day, 26 June, Russian independent media Verstka [reported](#) that the Belarusian authorities were building a military base for Wagner mercenaries near Asipovichy, a town roughly 100 kilometres from Minsk. Asipovichy already had a disused military base and a new base would be set up for 8,000 people.

This was [confirmed](#) by Lukashenka the following day, when he announced that Prigozhin had flown to Belarus's capital, Minsk, and that he had invited Wagner mercenaries to "stay with us for a while".

He said: "We offered them these abandoned military bases. Make yourself at home... Set up tents. We will help in any way we can. Until they decide what they will be doing here [in Belarus]." Satellite images from 30 June further confirmed that a [tent city](#) was being built near Asipovichy.

Later, Lukashenka hinted that Wagner mercenaries would do more in Belarus than rest: "We take a pragmatic approach to this. If their commanders come to us and [offer to] help us... Experience is invaluable. This is what we need to take from the Wagnerites," he [said](#). On 11 July, the Belarusian Defence Ministry [stated](#) that the Wagner group would now train Belarusian forces.

Now, almost a month after the failed Wagner rebellion, no one in Belarus has seen Prigozhin's mercenaries. Neither independent media nor the authoritative Belarusian Gayun monitoring group has found evidence of Wagner units' movement into or around the country. NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg [believes](#) that only a small number of Wagner mercenaries have so far moved to Belarus.

On 6 July, Lukashenka himself admitted that the mercenaries had not agreed to deploy near Asipovichy. They have a "[different vision](#)", he said, adding that they [are](#) in the same camps as before the rebellion – which is to say they are outside Belarus.

Prigozhin too seems in no hurry to settle down in a new location. His private jet has been tracked flying around Russia since the abortive coup. It appears he flew to the Machulishchy military base near Minsk on 27 June, perhaps even meeting with Lukashenka, but there is nothing to indicate he stayed in Belarus. On 6 July, Lukashenka himself [said](#) Prigozhin is now in St Petersburg.

The Wagner enigma

Many questions remain about the Wagner group itself. If it is to remain a single armed formation, who would finance it? Putin claimed Wagner was fully supported by the Russian state, which he said spent nearly [billion dollars](#) in the past year on the mercenaries' salaries alone. Belarusian authorities cannot afford to spend such sums on private military contractors – it's more than their entire [national defence budget](#). In any case, Lukashenka has continually stressed that the Wagner men would stay in Belarus at their own expense.

As for Prigozhin, he is also unlikely to be able to fund the Wagner group for any significant time period: the future of his vast business empire in Russia looks uncertain, though his companies have [continued to receive new state contracts](#) since the mutiny.

And any plans by the Belarusian authorities to somehow integrate Wagner men into their country's power structure (by using some of them as military instructors, for example), would mean employment for only a very few mercenaries. Considering the entire Belarusian army, excluding civilian personnel, is approximately 45,000–50,000 people, it would not be possible to have 25,000 instructors, which is the total strength of the Wagner group, according to Prigozhin.

Whatever happens, Belarus might have to face a testing challenge: the presence, even temporarily, of rebellious mercenaries on its soil.

A dangerous game

The deployment of Wagner mercenaries to Belarus does not fit with Lukashenka's usual behaviour, which suggests the decision may have been imposed on him.

Lukashenka's regime has always been much more centralised than Putin's. Unlike the Kremlin, it has never experimented with delegating the right to use violence and has no experience of

interacting with autonomous players such as Wagner. Lukashenka has long perceived anyone who might shake the state's monopoly on violence as a threat, and is known for his paranoia and the tendency to see intrigues and [conspiracies](#) everywhere.

Lukashenka may be trying to curry favour with the Wagner mercenaries, perhaps to prevent any future conflict

For example, in recent years, Lukashenka has stopped holding military parades, probably because [he believes he could be assassinated](#). It's hard to imagine that the Wagner uprising in Russia did not lead him to think of the risks of a 'march on Minsk' at some point in the future.

The Lukashenka regime [has been scaring](#) the population [with claims about foreign mercenaries](#) and militants for so long that it is sometimes difficult to understand what is just propaganda and what the authorities see as a real threat. In the summer of 2020, a group of 33 Wagner mercenaries flying to Istanbul via Minsk were [arrested and accused of preparing terrorist attacks in Belarus](#).

But it seems that now Lukashenka may be trying to curry favour with the Wagner mercenaries, perhaps to prevent any future conflict. While the Kremlin declared the rebels traitors and rushed to [debunk the 'myth'](#) of the mercenaries' military prowess, Lukashenka has spoken in respectful and complimentary terms about Wagner. He considers Prigozhin "an authoritative person", and the mercenaries the defenders of "[real civilisation](#)".

Military blackmail

Neighbouring Baltic states have expressed concern about members of an organisation [recognised](#) as terrorist in a number of countries being stationed in Belarus. Lithuania's president Gitanas Nausėda has said the Wagner mercenaries' presence is "a factor that aggravates our security situation". Polish president Andrzej Duda considers the developments a "negative signal" that should be discussed with NATO allies. Warsaw has already announced [it will send](#) additional police forces to the border with Belarus.

Britain's former army chief, General Richard Dannatt, has [suggested](#) Russia may use the Wagner deployment in Belarus to have another stab at capturing Kyiv. Although President Zelenskyi [insists](#) Prigozhin's mercenaries "are no longer capable of doing anything serious against Ukraine", the Ukrainian army has [received instructions](#) to strengthen the northern border.

Perhaps the loud statements about Wagner mercenaries "leaving for Belarus" have a quite different purpose from the words being used. Stationed in Belarus, the Wagner Group could, like mentions of tactical nuclear weapons, be used as a distraction from what is happening on the front lines. Russia is directly interested in the fact that Ukraine's armed forces could not withdraw their units from the Belarusian border and transfer them to the front, and that Europe would need to take care of its own security and think less about helping Ukraine.

For Lukashenka, it could also be beneficial to keep his neighbours guessing. At a meeting for Belarus's independence day on 3 July, [he claimed](#) he had received "a new wave of calls" from those "who do not recognise us". To date, there is no evidence of Western politicians queuing up to schedule telephone chats with Lukashenka after the Wagner crisis, but that is probably what he would like to achieve: to make the West talk to him and reckon with him.

The reality could, however, be quite different if the Wagner Group actually uses Belarusian territory for aggressive actions against Ukraine or NATO countries. In that case, everything could very quickly spiral out of control and Lukashenka would risk being drawn into a military escalation, perhaps against his will.

A version of this story was first [published](#) in the Russian language edition of oDR.

Igor Ilyash

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Open Democracy

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/belarus-lukashenka-deal-wagner-putin-prigozhin/>