

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 145. Putin under threat as Wagner mutiny

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Welcome to The Rest is Politics emergency podcast with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And we've got Alistair in his kitchen about to go to a wedding. So he's gonna get in real trouble from the family if they find out. He's got about half an hour before he's got a rush off for his wedding. But what's happened and the reason we've hit the emergency podcast button is the developments in Russia and Ukraine. Absolutely astonishing. Poroshenko, who is the sometimes called Putin's chef and who's this very sinister figure who was in jail for nine years, essentially part of Russian criminal gangs in the 1980s, runs this group called the Wagner Group, which has provided 25,000 of the fighting soldiers in Ukraine. And he has now turned around and effectively launched something between a mutiny and a coup d'etat, where he's announced that he's captured the largest Russian military base, Rostov-on-Don on the front line, and is demanding the dismissal of the senior military commanders.

And what do you make of it, Alistair? What's your sense of it?

It's very, very hard to know what to make of it. I mean, he's a fascinating character.

Look, he spent a lot of time in jail in the past, bit of a crook, got close to the very, the oligarch class. He became known as Putin's chef because he was, there are actually pictures of him.

I remember him serving George Bush at a dinner with him. He was actually the guy. There's a picture

of him leaning over Bush as Bush is talking to Putin. There's another picture of him leaning over Putin as he's serving him food. And that's why he became known as Putin's chef. And then got into this space, this mercenary space, which we've talked about this before. And I've talked about it in relation to Jacob Rees-Mogg's dad's book, *The Sovereign Individual*, where he predicted this idea of mercenary armies becoming as important as state actors. And I wonder if this is the first case of this being played out. Now, the truth is the Russian controlled military is way bigger than what this guy commands. But at the same time, the very fact that he has, for whatever reason, decided, he's had long running arguments with the Defense Minister, Shoigu, and with the head of the armed forces, Gerasimov, he's constantly slagging them off. He did a vituperative social media post on Telegram recently where he basically was effing and blinding or whatever the rush of effing and blinding is. And he was pictured in front of corpses, of his troops, many of whom, if you remember, were let out of prison to fight and were told that if they went and fought, they wouldn't have to go back to prison when they came back. And whether this is the classic thing of the dictator sitting at the top, allowing people below him to kind of fight things out. But the fact that Putin had to do that address to the nation today, looking very sober, I think he was wearing a black tie even, and essentially saying, this is an act of treason, this is a stab in the back of our country, we'll crush these people. And yet, you've now got two armies going around the place. So how the hell, this is a real boon for Ukraine, that's for sure.

It's unbelievable. And there's been wonderful social media stuff, which we'll share with listeners of Ukrainians trolling. There's a great shot, which begins with quite a serious Ukrainian soldier with a big beard and his camouflage uniform, looking at a screen. And then it cuts to a massive bag of popcorn next to him. And he's basically sitting there just eating popcorn, watching Putin's speech. And the general idea of the joke is that the Ukrainians are just

going to sit back and watch the Russians tear themselves to pieces. One of the things I've noticed talking to people this morning is that this being Russia, there are an enormous number of conspiracy theories going around. People in Moscow are terrified. They don't know what to make of it. Some of them initially thought that this was all fake, and that Putin had organized this with Poroshenko as a way of getting rid of his senior generals. So he was encouraging Poroshenko to speak out. And that would give him the excuse to clean house. But it looks less and less likely that that was the case because it's very difficult not to see this now as something that makes Putin look really weak, undermines his credibility. And it's almost impossible to imagine him meeting Poroshenko's demands when you've got 25,000 armed men seizing a military base, claiming their thinking of marching on Moscow, which is 660 miles away from Rostov, so taking a bit of time. Unless he gets rid of his army high command. How can he get rid of his army high command without looking as though he's just given in to mutiny?

The truth is that Progression has been very, very critical of the overall military strategy at various points throughout. And look, there's some talk that he actually sees himself as Putin's successor. Definitely sees himself as being a better military commander than the people who are actually supposedly in charge. But if you think about it, having this mercenary army, where the loyalty to flag and country, I don't care what anybody tells me, is likely to be less than if you were fighting for your own flag and country. It's an untenable situation unless the people at the top have total control. And what you're seeing is this guy effectively saying, you're not in control of this, I am. And the point you're making about what people in Russia are meant to think. One, it'd be very interesting to see, I'm always interested to hear Steve Rosenberg

on the BBC, because he of course is telling us what he thinks, but he's also having to track Russian media. So it's important to know what the Russians are being told about what's happening now

beyond the conspiracy theories. Well, actually, even the state media are saying about this because they presumably have covered Putin's statement in full, but he didn't name peregiosion. It felt almost like he was saying there's something going on in here and we're over here and we're having to

deal with it. But you could tell from his body language. And I can remember from meetings with Putin, although he looks very, very calm all the time, he has this sort of tightening of his face, and his cheek muscles go. And you can always tell when he's very, very, very, very tense. And in a funny sort of way, I looked at it, first of all, because I'm useless and Fiona's not here at the moment, I couldn't get the sound to work on my laptop. And so actually, I saw him first without sound. I watched him and he looked really, really, really tense and angry. It's very weird, isn't it? At the moment there, as you say, Putin is not named peregiosion and peregiosion is not naming Putin. Peregiosion has named, as you said, the Defense Minister and the Chief of the Army, who he called a bunch of fat cats sitting around at home. This has also been a very weird moment. So peregiosion is a very wealthy guy, runs this amazing network of grocery stores, restaurant businesses, catering. But he's clearly found a new lease of life being right out there on the front line with his troops and sees himself and reinventing himself as a general. On the private military companies, one of the things I think hasn't been covered as much, is that the Wagner Group is just one of 10 major private military companies now operating in Russia and on the front line. The Defense Minister himself has his own private military company. And in a sense,

Putin has the equivalent, this thing which is being described as the National Guard. It's not really the National Guard. It's what used to be called Omon and the Interior Ministry troops combined. So it's called Roscovardia. And this is nearly half a million people that Putin is relying on separate from the Ministry of Defense to protect him. They're his Praetorian Guard. They're like the Roman emperors relying on their Praetorian Guard in Rome to try to stop it happening.

Yeah. And how often do the guard turn against the emperor in history? I would have said at the start of this, I don't know because I don't know their relationship, but the sense was that Praetorian was there and given so much power because Putin did see him as completely one of his. And yet, since then, we've had this clear fallout. He doesn't call out Putin, as you say, but in calling out the Defense Minister and the head of the armed forces, he's effectively calling out Putin. The other thing that I think is interesting in this is clearly the places where he's directing this mutiny attempted coup, call it what you will. They are very, very strategic places. The first place, you know, Rostov-on-Don is the headquarters of the Russian Southern Military District Command. So they're the ones, if I'm right, I think I'm right on this, they're the ones that will probably be most directly engaged in the direction of the handling of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. 100%. So how does that work out? So from the Ukrainian's point of view,

this is incredibly beneficial. I think there's going to be a big decision that the Ukrainian commanders have to make. There will be some people saying, mount the counteroffensive now. These guys are so distracted, they're all fighting each other. This is the time to break through, drive all the way through to Crimea. There are going to be other people saying, don't do it now. Let the Russians tear themselves to pieces because if you mount the counteroffensive

now, it will just reunify the Russians and give them a reason to put it together. And I think at the moment, the Ukrainians are on the second path there, as it were, sitting back in that great video, eating popcorn and watching the Russians do it. Well, they make some tactical advances. So they've just recaptured Bakhmut, which was this horrible, I don't know, tens of thousands of people killed in trench warfare of the Russians, just narrowly seizing that and looks like they've lost that again. So I think we can expect the Ukrainians at the very least to be taking tactical advantage of this all the way along the front line over the next few days.

Mm. Zelensky has posted on his telegram account. And one of the things I really admire about Zelensky, whatever's happening, he always essentially says the same things.

It's called message discipline.

He's got such message. Well, it's message discipline and adaptability. It would be so easy for him to sort of go out and say really big, dramatic things. And he's basically just said, anyone who chooses the path of evil destroys itself. That's what I call a big strategic message. Russia's weakness is obvious. Russia used propaganda to mask its weakness and the stupidity of its government, nice personal insult. And now there is so much chaos that no like and hide it. And all this is one person, although he's not able to lead to anything else. In other words, he's basically, I guess he's looking at somebody like Krogosian and saying, right, I may despise you, I may despise what you do, but I'm going to make this all about Putin, because this now is about trying to divide opinion within Russia. And people will, I mean, you've now got, you've now got the military out on the streets of Moscow, because they're obviously worried about where this goes.

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Yeah, yeah, the people out on the streets of Moscow, this sort of praetorian guard lot separate from the Defense Ministry, it's Putin trying to, trying to hunker down. I think you've also put your finger on something very interesting there, which we should talk about more when more information

comes out, which is the extent to which this has really been exactly what Zelensky has been trying to achieve, that his use of social media, his use of propaganda has been about whipping up the conflict between Krogosian Putin and the generals as much as he can. And this is really a kind of triumph of that kind of approach. I guess the other thing that's interesting, so we know from history that the arm of Russian intelligence and security stretches very, very far, that if it means wiping out people on the streets of the UK, they do it. They have been one of their big strategic goals since this whole thing started has been to take out Zelensky, and they have failed. Will Putin be sitting there thinking, right, we have to take out Krogosian? And that's, so you've put your finger on it, because in a sense, one of the things motivating Krogosian is that he felt they were about to take him out. So there had been a bungled attempt, it seems, by the FSB, the KGB's successors, to try to abduct him. And then there was this attack he claims against the Wagner camps led by an amazing rockets, helicopters, gunships, and the rest, which was the final thing that triggered him. And that was an attack by Sergei Shogo against him, which triggered him to move and seize Rostov. So I think Krogosian felt, or at least he's suggesting that his back was against the wall, that he was going to be killed anyway, and that he needed to move before the Defense Ministry and the intelligence services took him out. And it's at that point that these 10 different types of military unit, how they split, who goes with who, and who remains neutral is absolutely critical.

Now, I think it's not likely, and this is me really, you know, I apologize, because the chance of this being right is going to go wrong quickly, because we're early days, but it doesn't feel like a coup d'etat, feels like a mutiny. And the difference is that, so coup d'etat, you really have to get up to Moscow, you've got to grab the president, you've got to take the radio and television stations, you've got to take control in the first two, three hours. If you don't, generally, the lumbering state wakes up and over the next few days crushes you. This is much more like a mutiny, but that will feel to Putin. And then the speech you were referring to, he talks about 1917. And that's something that really terrifies people, because of course, the Russian Revolution came out of a mutiny of soldiers on those fronts. And so that's why he's thinking 1917, he's thinking mutinies of the collapse regime.

The second city where the Wagner forces have now reached, and where they've seized the military facilities as well, is, I don't know how it's pronounced, which is actually halfway between Rostov and Moscow. So that's, you know, he's only got, he's got 25,000 troops that have been operating in Ukraine. But as you say, we've talked before about the reach of the Wagner group, all pretty much right around Africa. How many forces can he call upon more generally, if he would try to build up? So just quickly on that, he seems to have demobilized at least 25,000. So he could almost double his forces by bringing back the people that he demobilized. And how many of the ones that he has would actually be loyal to him? I thought, oh, no, I'm not getting involved in this. I went to fight for Russia, not for this guy. How many of the Russian forces would be thinking, do you know what, I've had enough of this, let's get involved with the guy. I mean, I think this is what Peter will be worrying about, is actually where the where the chess piece is now, now moved to. And, you know, and then whether

it extends to the population, that I think is the thing that will absolutely be terrifying.

So certainly, Surovkin, who is the main commander up on the Ukrainian front, made this big statement

yesterday, whether it was extraordinary, Surovkin's this kind of big, burly sort of central casting looks like a cage fighter veteran of the Afghan wars. And he gave this speech yesterday, grabbing a gun, saying, you know, you're going to stand down, this is rebellion against the elected president of Russia. But his troops haven't moved. And that's presumably because the mutiny of Wagner

reflects a general sense from all the Russian troops that they haven't been properly supplied, they've been betrayed, they've been treated as cannon fodder, they're not getting their arms, ammunition, food, casualty, evacuation. So at the moment, the danger for Putin is that the Ministry of Defense troops seem at the moment to be neutral. Now, I still think the odds are against very, very strongly against Puroshkin. I mean, if you were betting, it still seems to me that he's in a weak position. He's triggered it without doing a proper coup. He might be able to get from 25 to 50,000 troops. But everything now rests on this praetorian guard of almost half a million people, most famous around Moscow. He is a very, very, very emotional guy. You can see that in the way that he communicates. He's put out a message on his telegram, on the official Wagner telegram channel, as a direct response to Putin's statement. And one assumes this is him, I don't know, but this is what they put out saying it is from him. And in his voice about treason of Motherland, the president was deeply mistaken. We are patriots of our Motherland. We've been fighting brackets unspoken, unlike Grasimov and Shogu, and are fighting now. And nobody is going to, as demanded by the president or the FSB or anyone else, nobody is going to admit our guilt because we don't want our country to live anymore in corruption, lies, and bureaucracy.

So he's signaling one of the risks is also that he's whipping up not the progress of Russian left, but the right. There are people far to the right of Putin, people who think that the war should have been conducted in a much more brutal way, who will be looking to try to get that nationalist thing going. But probably not yet maybe top or Putin, because I think there's a sense somebody, I was talking to a great Russian expert earlier today called Chris Donnelly, who was our main man in defense intelligence for years and a great Sovietologist, and he was saying that it feels to like the barons moving against King John and the Middle Ages. They don't want to actually replace King John, they want to control him. So his view is nobody wants to be the president of Russia, but they want to control Putin. Progression is demanding that these people see him and he sits down and basically gives them a piece of his mind. It's very hard given what he has done and given what he has since said about what he's done. It's very hard to see him back inside any kind of tent that has Putin at the top of it. 100%. And I think, I mean, we don't know yet what this means for the broader war. There are many, many scenarios. Progression could be curled quite quickly. This could spark the Russian military to pull their socks up and mount a more professional counter offensive, or it could collapse the country into a pseudo civil war. But what we do know is that this has revealed, and this is what I think Zelensky is emphasizing again and again, is just how sick the regime that Putin has created over the last 23 years is. It's a regime which isn't really controlled by oligarchs. It's actually controlled by people with guns. And as I say, almost 10 different warring military units run by warlords and this sense of a fragile dictator with a collapsing economy whose only legitimacy

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is whipping up this nationalistic mad fantasy about NATO threatening them through Ukraine. All the sickness of that is now coming to a head. And I think this may mean that whatever residual support they're getting from the rest of the world is going to fall away. I don't think the Chinese are going to be impressed by this. I don't think that they're allies elsewhere. No. And the rather sinister babyface looking guy with a long beard, who the Chechen leader, Kadirov, he's piled in as well now and has said that he's going to be sending forces to help Putin crush the rebellion. Whatever aims you're given, whatever promises are made to you, the safety of our state and cohesion of Russian society are the most important thing right now. And Chechen fighters from the Defence Ministry and National Guard have left for the zones of tension. The rebellion must be crushed. If that requires harsh measures, then we are ready. So pretty big weekend, I would say.

Pretty big weekend. Thank you for cutting into your wedding. We're going to have to keep watching the space. Yeah. Then could disappear in two days or it could redefine the whole course of the conflict and we'll have to keep on top of it. And you know, there was a time, Rory, there was a time when the British response to something like this would be fundamental in the whole world. We want to see it and hear it. So it was a bit dispiriting just to hear the usual UK government's emergency committee is to meet to discuss the situation in Russia. There was an appeal for calm on all sides. And there is longstanding advice to British citizens not to travel to Russia. Right. Thanks for that. Now, listen, before you go, Rory, can I, can I?

Yes, you want to pay a tribute to a friend? Well, I do. We had some very, very sad news this morning. Margaret McDonough, who's been ill for some time, but she was a massive part of the new Labour team in the 97 election campaign, one of the most formidable campaigners I've ever met. I think I mentioned on the podcast before, as the person who actually came in to see me one day and said, what do you think of this as a song? And it was Things Can Only Get Better, which became our song. She's had a brain tumour for some time. Thankfully, I say thankfully, she came to a special dinner we had for Tony Blair's 70th a while back. It was all the original team. And even though she was in a wheelchair, couldn't really speak properly, had a carer, it was fantastic that she was able to come. But sadly, for most of us, that was the last time we saw her alive. So I just want to say Margaret McDonough really was one of the key people

who helped Labour win that first election. And it was one of the most amazing campaigners the Labour Party ever had. It was very sad that she's died. And you would probably know her sister, Siobhan, who was an MP for Mitcham and Norman. Yeah, I do. I do. Sorry to hit that answer. Good. Well, you're now going to go off to a wedding. I would say that maybe that'll cheer you up. But I know that you don't really like weddings, but I hope you're surprised. Yeah, anyway, we'll see you soon. See you soon. Thanks again. Bye bye.