

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / What Just Happened in Russia This Weekend?

You may find this hard to believe, but 60 songs that explain the 90s, America's favorite poorly named music podcast is back with 30 more songs than 120 songs total. I'm your host Rob Harvilla, here to bring you more shrewd musical analysis, poignant nostalgic reveries, crude personal anecdotes, and rad special guests, all with even less restraint than usual. Join us once more on 60 songs that explain the 90s every Wednesday on Spotify. Today's episode is about one of the most confusing weekends of news I can remember. The weekend of the Russia coup, which turned out to not quite really be a Russia coup. Today's guest is our resident Russia-Ukraine war expert, Professor Paul Post. He is a military historian and political science professor at the University of Chicago. But first, to catch people up, a little TikTok of this weekend. So first we have Yevgeny Kregogin, the leader of the Wagner group, which is a private military force and one of the shadiest individuals of the entire Putin regime. Kregogin was a teenage criminal who spent almost a decade in prison for robbing apartments as a teen and 20-year-old. He got out and in the 1990s sold hot dogs with his parents in St. Petersburg, then called Leningrad. When the Soviet Union collapsed, he used the proceeds from his hot dog business and probably also his criminal connections

to get into a range of other industries, grocery store chains, the restaurant business, construction. In the 2000s, he became known as Putin's chef, holding a series of special dinners for the Russian leader at some of his fancy restaurants and providing catering services to the Kremlin. But thinking of Kregogin as a caterer, does he disservice to who this guy actually was? This was not a near-restaurant term. This is not the guy-theory of Moscow. This is the man who would do anything that serves Putin and the state's interests and was exceptional at serving the state's interests out of the public eye. So, for example, 2016, when the Russian state wants to toy with U.S. elections, wants to essentially spam social media with online propaganda, they turned to a shattery organization called the Internet Research Agency, whose leader was Yevgeny Kregogin. When Putin wanted to intervene with the affairs of several African countries that they trade with or control or extract resources from, and they wanted to offer military and security support to some foreign autocrats that could form allegiances with the Kremlin, they would count on paramilitary organizations like the Wagner Group, helmed by Yevgeny Kregogin. And in 2014, when Russia invaded Ukraine and in the many years since that Russia has been needling, toying, trying to invade Ukraine, who was there but the Wagner Group? And in the current war against Ukraine, the Wagner Group has been among the most fearsome and effective of the Russian units. But in the last few months, clearly something has changed. Kregogin, who had enjoyed this thrillingly successful career as a shadowy operator, who avoided the public spotlight, will suddenly he changed his tune. For months now, he's been recording videos directly criticizing the war effort and calling out Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu. Kregogin accused his bosses, Russian generals, of stonewalling his ammunition requests and allowing his fighters to die, quote, in heaps, end quote, in Ukraine. And then, recently, Shoigu demanded that all of the volunteer formations, the private military groups like Wagner, had to sign a contract with the defense ministry by July 1st. They're trying now to organize all of their efforts under a single head. That would have placed Kregogin's mercenaries under his nemesis control. Kregogin says no. He records another video calling the entire Russian invasion a sham designed to enrich Russian plutocrats, a group that, by the way, would theoretically include his own boss and old

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friend Vladimir Putin. Putin releases a video essentially accusing Kregogen, his old buddy, of being a traitor to the Russian state. And then, this weekend, after accusing Russian forces of conducting a strike on his own fighters, Kregogen launches an attack against his own country. He captures Rostov-on-Don, a military nerve center in South Russia, and he begins a march on Moscow. And this is where people this weekend are waking up in America.

Looking on, news analysts thinking, what is happening here? Is this civil war in Russia? Is the Putin state crumbling? Crumbling at the hands of the Frankenstein monster of its own creation? Is this 1917, the year that Nicholas II was knocked out of office in the Bolshevik Revolution? But then, in a matter of hours, it was all over. A deal was struck. Kregogen goes off to Belarus. His Wagner group in Russia seems to be either disbanded or at least stripped from his control. There is no coup. It's all over, up in smoke. What do we call this?

What did we just witness? It's not a win for Kregogen, who's hanging out in some hotel in Minsk on assassination watch for the rest of his life. You can't call it a win for Putin.

His confidant has now turned traitor. It's clearly not a win for the Russian military, which has lost one of its best units. So, I have to confess, the reason I wanted to have this conversation with Paul is that I am at a loss as to what this weekend actually meant.

Why did Kregogen do this? What was he actually trying to accomplish?

Why did Putin let him go free? What was he trying to communicate?

And what, if anything, does this mean for the future of the war in Ukraine?

I'm Derek Thompson. This is Plain English.

Professor Paul Post, welcome back to the show. Derek, it's a pleasure to be back on the show.

Paul, I had to bring you back because this weekend is very confusing. It was very confusing. I think a lot of people woke up to the possibility that Russia was descending into a violent civil war with a private military force turning on the state, marching in columns toward Moscow.

And hours later, just hours later, the mutiny was over and the leader of that mutiny, Evgeny Kregogen, is being whisked away to Belarus. So, let's start at the beginning. Tell us what we need to know about Kregogen and the Wagner group, which I've heard pronounced Wagner and Wagner

by purported Russian experts. So, I guess, first, pick your own pronunciation, and then tell me what happened. Who are these guys? It's a great question, Derek. And you're right. The events this weekend were so confusing. To start, yes, let's talk about the Wagner group.

So, my understanding is, just in terms of housekeeping, Wagner is the pronunciation because the founder of the group was not Kregogen. He claims to be the founder, but the actual founder

was Dmitry Utkin. And the understanding, it's shady in terms of who these people were, but he was part of the military establishment and so forth, but that he had a fascination with the composer Wagner, who, of course, was Adolf Hitler's favorite composer. And so, it's understood that maybe Utkin was a neo-Nazi, and so that's why he named it this. So, that's the running theory, of course, when you're dealing with organizations like this. There's always a little bit of shadiness of exactly what's going on. But that, from the people who really study this, that's the understanding of exactly the kind of the origins of this group. So, the Wagner group is, as you said, you could label it a private military corporation. That's at least how it calls itself. I think it's a little bit different than that, and that they're not the same as like

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some of the organizations that we think BlackRock or others that the US government has worked with.

They're really kind of very closely tied to the Russian government exclusively. And it's really a means, it's become a useful means for the Russian government to be able to, if you will, have plausible deniability about some of the more unsavory things that they've been doing in the world over the past decade. So, this organization came about in 2014, shortly after Russia took control of the Crimean Peninsula, and then started to become engaged in a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine. Of course, that's something that's very important, though I've been on the show a few times over the past year talking about the war that's unfolding in Ukraine. It's always important to remember that that is just the invasion that happened in February of last year. There's, of course, been fighting going on Ukraine, going back to 2014. And a lot of that fighting was actually being facilitated by this group. And that was something that allowed Putin, in particular, to kind of have some plausible deniability about what's going on. Like, well, no, it's not Russian forces. And then, of course, if you have members of this organization who are being killed, well, they don't count the official casualty count, right? And so, it's really become a useful instrument by which the Russian government, the Russian military, and specifically Putin, has been able to carry out operations not just in Ukraine, but also Syria and throughout Africa, to be able to have Russian involvement, but do so at kind of an arms-length relationship, that it's like, well, it's not directly the Russian military, though the Russian military equips them. The Russian, a lot of the individuals who serve in it, working in it, come from the Russian military, but it's not technically the Russian military. And so, that's kind of, you know, it's a little bit of a vague way of describing it, but it gives you a sense that it's not the same as, like, a private military contract that we typically think of. It's not the same as a mercenary organization of, like, just don't work for anybody and whoever hires, like, they'll just immediately turn and work for the United States if we offered them more money. They don't work in that way. They are very much tied to the Russian government, and their, again, their goal is to kind of provide this kind of distance between what the Russian government once done and their actual presence. Now, what exactly have they been doing in Ukraine? Well, I mentioned they've been involved in Ukraine,

Eastern Ukraine, since 2014, but ever since the invasion happened last year, they've taken on a larger role in terms of actually carrying out the fighting. And the reason why is related to things that you and I have talked about previously in this podcast, right, which is that this fighting has not gone according to plan for Russia, right? And of course, the last time I was on the podcast was back in the fall. That was shortly after the major offensive that Ukraine had launched that had generated a lot of success for them. And then the question that we ended that conversation on was,

well, how's Putin going to respond? Well, of course, he did respond with a major mobilization call and then kind of digging in on the lines that they hold. But it's gotten harder to be able to bring in personnel to continue fighting. They've had a lot of casualties. And the Wagner group has proven very useful in this regard because they've been able to bring in individuals from prisons. They've been able to bring in some of these individuals, criminals, if you will, to be able to fill in the ranks, people who are willing to just say, sure, I'll sign up. It doesn't matter if this is a, I don't have any nationalism about this, just pay me and I'll come and I'll fight. And so the

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Wagner group has been able to help fill in that gap. The area where they've been playing the biggest role, most notably over the past six months, has been particularly the Battle of Bakhmut.

The Battle of Bakhmut, of course, is this meat grinder of a conflict that was going on for months in eastern Ukraine, one that I've talked to other people about as being analogous to some of the fighting we would see in World War I. Trench warfare, efforts by both sides trying to make movement and launching offensive and counter offenses with very little movement. And in the end, Russia actually won that battle. They gained control of Bakhmut, but it was very much identified

as a peric victory. Massive casualties suffered by both sides, but in particular by Russia.

The key is, is that most of those casualties were suffered by the Wagner group. They were suffered by individuals fighting through the Wagner group. That was something that, even as people were pointing out there, saying, oh, well, Russia is incurring all these casualties at Bakhmut.

It's like, yes, but they're using the mercenary organization. They're not using their elite troops to do this. They're using the Wagner group to do this. I think that that was something that contributed in two ways to what we then solved this weekend. The way it contributed was two fold. Number one, they did win. And that gave a lot of notoriety. And if you will, confidence to this group and in particular, Pergosian. We could talk more about who exactly he is in a moment. Secondly, though, they did win, but they actually weren't thrilled with how the fighting went.

Pergosian had been very vocal about feeling he was being undersupplied and he wanted to see a change in the relationship regarding how they were being treated by the Russian Defense Ministry.

So you already had these tensions coming out of the Battle of Bakhmut. Well, I think that came to a head this weekend, in particular because the Russian Defense Ministry, maybe due to these issues, was looking to try to change the relationship. They wanted to move away from this

arms length relationship and bring this organization, the Wagner group, as well as some other organizations, formally into the Ministry of Defense. And Pergosian, the Wagner group said, Wagner group said, no, we don't want that. We're not going to do that. And then he went as far as to say, in fact, they're not even trying to change the terms of the deal. They're going to try to eliminate us. And that was what then led him to want to launch what happened this weekend.

That is a great, great piece of background. Turning to the events of this past weekend specifically, I saw news reports calling this a coup. I saw news reports calling this a mutiny or an insurrection. You've said that that might be a category error. The best term for what we saw might not be coup, mutiny, insurrection. It might be bargaining tactic. Now, given what we know now,

what do you think is the best way to describe what just happened? What do you think Yvgeny Pergosian was trying to accomplish this past weekend? It's exactly right in terms of wanting to put a label on this and struggling to put a label on this. And I think people immediately turned to the word coup because it looked like a coup, right? You know, there's this military, they're going towards Moscow, and he's making these claims about Putin. And Putin is coming on to national television and saying these are traitors, right? I mean, it very much has that sense of going to be a coup. But for it to be a coup, the intent has to be to take over the country, right? To actually overthrow the leader. And it was never really clear that that was ever the case, that that was ever the motivation, even by Pergosian himself. That was never really laid out as being the reason for what was trying to be done. So the question is, then what was he

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trying to do? And this gets to where it is both on the one hand easy to explain and extremely difficult to explain. So why is it easy to explain? It's easy to explain because of what I was just talking about, that there had been efforts by the Ministry of Defense to kind of change the terms of the deal, the terms of the relationship that the Wagner group has with the Russian Ministry of Defense. And they didn't want to see that deal changed. So there was already an understanding that that was happening. And a lot of observers who very much follow kind of the internal workings of the Russian Ministry of Defense so forth, had been seeing this. But I think everybody was then shocked by what happened. I mean, it's very much like the great line for the movie Anchorman, right? I mean, that escalated quickly. I mean, it escalated so quickly. I think even people who were very, very, very close followers of Pergosian, very close followers of the Wagner group or Russian internal affairs were surprised by what just happened. Like, whoa, why is this what's going on? They knew that there was this dispute. They knew there was this debate.

But why did he take this extreme measure? That's where people are trying to figure out is like, what led him to do that, right? Given that it wasn't a coup. But instead, it seemed like he wanted to take an action to try to ensure that the Wagner group would continue to have autonomy. They would continue to operate in a way they saw fit, but would also have the resources they needed.

And the question became, why did they turn on Mossboundless Way? Now, you could say it was to demonstrate their capability. You could say that it was because he kind of one of those things of, you know, the whole idea of like dogs chasing a car and what will happen if they actually catch it, right? There were some people, a lot of folks kind of thought that, hey, I will do this, we'll start marching towards Moscow and Putin's eventually going to back down. And the understanding

is that he maybe didn't even have a plan for what would happen if Putin didn't back down.

I think that's part of the reason why he eventually kind of said, okay, fine, we'll stop.

But that's where, you know, the second part, it becomes very hard to answer. It's like on the one hand, yeah, they're bargaining, they're disputing. But on the other hand, where this is really hard to answer is it's not exactly clear why he thought this was the best way to go about doing it.

So let me back up just a bit and tell you what I felt like I was attempting to piece together over the weekend in terms of Prygogin's motivations and tell me how my interpretation sets with you. So in my reading of Prygogin, it seems like this is a guy with a lot of pride, a shadowy operator who does a lot of the dirty work for Putin. And in so doing, has forged a very, very close personal relationship with the dictator of Russia. The man is the state. For months, he feels like his mercenary group, private military group, whatever you want to call it, the Wagner group, has been undersupplied and under directed. They have had terrible resource supply from the Russians. And he feels like the overall war effort has just been completely bungled from the start and consistently in a way that has directly endangered perhaps himself personally and his own men. Now you have the Ministry of Defense saying after a series of incredibly difficult World War One style fights, the Wagner group has to transfer their authority from Prygogin to the Ministry of Defense. They're saying you have to have your mercenaries, your private military fighters. They now have to sign contracts with Russia. They have to fly under our banner. These aren't your men anymore. These are Russians men, Putin's men. He is

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extremely

pissed about all of this coming to a head about the fact that he feels cut off from Putin, about the fact that he feels like at the same time he's been undersupplied. He also now has to face the indignity of the people he has the least respect for now layering him. And he just loses it. And he posts these series of videos that show this kind of crescendo of anger that ends with him doing the unthinkable, which is marching columns of his private military toward Moscow, at which point it just seems like at some point on the highway from southern Russia to Moscow, he has like this, whether it's a come to Jesus moment or an actual deal is put on the table for him and he realizes, I can't actually invade. I'm completely screwed if I invade Moscow. I have to take the deal that is in front of me and that deal seems to involve him losing Wagner group's control in Ukraine, maintaining some control over this group that he has been given lots of power to from Putin and relocating himself to Belarus. To what extent does that sort of jumbled interpretation of events this past week can sit with you? I think it is a great take on this, Derek. There's two things that I think we really want to unpack with what you were just saying because I think that you touched on really a very good way to kind of make sense of what's happening. But the two things I think are worth unpacking and they're related is that the idea that everything that he wanted and he could have achieved because of exactly the reasons you laid out that he would be upset, he could have also achieved by just having his soldiers say, you know what, we're done fighting. No, until we get a better deal, we're just not going to fight. We're just going to sit here. We're going to go sit at the cafes that we were frequenting on our way to Moscow. Why don't we just sit down and we just refuse to fight? And given, you know, I can't see where that would have led to anything different. That might have been just as effective as what he did, maybe even more so, just saying, you know what, we're done fighting because you already know how good we are at fighting. Look at what we did at Bakhmut. We're not going to do it anymore until you give us the deal we want. I think what was key and that you touched on was that, you know, perversion. And this is where I think now maybe it's useful for us to actually talk a little bit about him as a person. But, you know, the idea that maybe he just wasn't thinking clearly, you know, he gets such an array, he was like, that's it, we're doing this. And eventually he has a moment of clarity on the way and he says, wait, what in the world am I doing? We can't, like, what are we going to do if we get there? We're not going to actually fight this. So I think it is worth kind of unpacking a little bit about perversion. And someone who really knows perversion very well, spent a long time studying him, is Kimberly Martin at Bernard College at Columbia University. She's an expert on the Soviet Union, Russia, and she has studied Pergoshian news very well. And one of the key things that she likes to talk about when talking about Pergoshian is he really is like thinks he's more than what he actually is. And that he, you know, he portrays himself as the founder of the Wagner Group. He's not the founder of the Wagner Group. He portrays himself as like this great entrepreneur and so forth. And it's like, you know, because he had hot dog stands that became grocery stores, it became restaurants, became this. It was like, no, he was very good. He had a lot of connections through the criminal underworld. That's where his connections are. That's where he comes in. He is a dangerous individual. And he is someone who has all these connections going back to the St. Petersburg days that both he and Putin were in St. Petersburg at the same time. And Putin was the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. And that's when that's when Pergoshian through his catering business started working with Putin

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and

they started to get to know each other. And they were both familiar with kind of the criminal underworld there in St. Petersburg. So a big part of where his value comes in and so forth is the idea that he just has these connections. He is someone who, you know, he has spent time in prison. He is not a military strategist. He has no military background. He's not this like great entrepreneur. He is someone who has always kind of latched onto Putin and followed through Putin and has gained because of Putin. And the way that Putin, the reason why Putin has valued him is because

he does have these connections that allow him to pull certain levers regarding the corruption, regarding the criminal underworld there, hence the reason why he was able to pull off like the recruiting from the prisons and so forth to be able to equip the Wagner group. So he is someone who is, you could very well say he is someone who could behave irrationally. He is someone who is not, you know, sit there. He's not a grand military strategist. And so it is very possible to your description that he may have just flown off the handle and said, that's it. We're turning to Moscow and then eventually realizing, wait, I can't actually pull this off. Right. I guess what I'm trying to say is, and I don't know that I put it as articulately as I meant to in my last comment question, I think it's easy from the vantage point of an American news consumer to assume that everything that happens in the Russian-Ukrainian war is an act of geopolitics, is an enormous demonstration of geopolitical interests and concerns and motivations. But people are people and people have interpersonal considerations and motivations. And is it possible that what a lot of news analysts in America called a grand coup, a grand mutiny, a grand insurrection, was actually just

like a guy who was fucking pissed off at his bosses. Like he just doesn't like the Ministry of Defense. He doesn't like being layered. He feels like the management has been terrible in this war and now he fears that he's losing his relationship with Putin. He's losing power. And as you said, he just flies off the handle and his criticisms of Russia's military strategy just escalate, escalate, escalate to the point that he's already on fire. He might as well just say the big thing, which is that this whole war is just focaccia. It was all about just getting a couple of rich people even richer. And every single decision that he makes makes sense from the psychology of the last decision that he made. But he ends up just walking himself over a cliff and realizes that, oh wait, I'm not actually going to invade Moscow with 4,000 people in military columns. To me, another big question here, this is a double-barreled mystery. One mystery that we've tried to sort out here is what the hell was Prugodzhin trying to accomplish. And maybe it was a mutiny. Maybe it was a coup. Maybe this is a, what is it called? He's a puppet of some other interest that are trying to overthrow Putin. Of course it's possible, but also maybe it's just an interpersonal squab. But the other mystery here is why was the penalty from Putin so light? I mean, Russia is a country where teenagers can be jailed for using the wrong noun to describe the quote, special military operation. It's illegal to call this a war. You have people who are thrown into prison for decades for mild social media criticism of the war in Ukraine. Prugodzhin's criticism was not mild. It was treasonous. And Putin himself, I believe, in his statement after Prugodzhin spoke, said this is essentially treason. This man is stabbing Russia in the back. It seems like Prugodzhin was simply put in a cab and flown to Minsk, Belarus.

Why was the penalty for him so light if he was essentially driving armored columns on a highway

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up to Moscow? So this has led to, this has led to several theories, right? There's several theories going on exactly on this point. Now, one of them, and this is coming from some folks who are, you know, credible. This is not coming from fringe organizations. Some people wonder, was this an inside job, right? Like, was this whole thing orchestrated by Putin and Prugodzhin? But the problem with that theory is on the one hand- Which is just to back up, even if we're going to dismiss the theory, just put a little meat on those bones. What would even be the purpose of an inside job in this case? No, that's exactly, your question is exactly the problem with the theory, right? Is that people go, but why would you do that? Like, what would Putin gain from basically showing that he's weak, showing that there's, you know, making very prominent the fissures that are in the Russian military establishment right now, right? That would, it would not benefit Putin at all. So I think that's how some people on the one hand, that theory would make sense given, as you just said, the light punishment, like, wait, that was all about nothing? Like, it just, like, that's not nothing. Like, he's marching soldiers towards Moscow. And now everybody's like, oh, no, no, nothing to see here. So that would suggest that there was some sort of inside notion, inside job going on, because Putin has kind of that control of the state, right? But again, the problem with that theory is, how does Putin benefit in any way from what happened over the weekend, right? There would have been other ways he could have done this, including the, what I said, if the Wagner group had simply said, you know what, we're not fighting, that would allow Putin to throw his defense minister, Shoigu, under the bus, right? He could have said, oh, this is all your fault because they're not fighting. It's all because of your pronouncement back in June. That you could have seen as like orchestrated, right? You know, something along those lines that Putin wanted to kind of move his defense minister even more out of the picture. But to have the forces march all the way to Moscow, I think the most logical explanation is what you were describing, which is just this guy went off the handle, and this was the way he's going to address it. And then he realized this was not a good idea. Now, why though, be that as it may, to your direct question, why did Putin basically let him off the hook, right? And I think the, especially given what he had just said, and this is a key reason why a lot of folks think that Putin is now weaker today than he was on Friday, that, you know, at first people are going to be like, well, of course, Putin's going to be weak because this is showing fissures in the Russian government. This is showing fissures in the Russian military. And, you know, that's going to lead to a lack of support. But the main reason that people are now saying he's weak is because of this, that it like, wow, he called this guy a traitor. This is not going to stand. And then he's like, no, you know, it's all good. Well, I think a big reason why is because at the end of the day, Putin has himself backed into a corner. That corner is he is obsessed with conquering Ukraine. Now, he can't conquer all of Ukraine. We've talked about this on the podcast before, you know, that the operational ease of this proved to not be the case for a variety of reasons. And so he started settling on the Eastern provinces. And we're going to at least control the East. We're going to take control of that. We're going to hold Crimea. And that's going to allow us to eventually declare victory, right? We're eventually going to be able to declare victory. It doesn't matter how many soldiers we've killed, we're going to be able to declare victory. And he's bent on doing that. That is his number one priority from my perspective. That is his number one priority. It's not saving face. It's not, it is, he wants to be able to declare a victory by holding those Eastern provinces, holding out long enough until he can get some sort of deal

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from the West, from Ukraine, to be able to hold that, even if it becomes a frozen conflict where there is no formal deal, but just the fighting kind of dies down and Russia has control.

That is his priority, number one. And the reality is to pull that off, he needs the Wagner group. He needs those soldiers. And so he can't afford, given their manpower issues, given the economic issues they're having due to the sanctions, due to the military equipment being destroyed, he can't afford to throw a bunch, you know, several thousand soldiers into prison. And those soldiers, of course, are taking orders from Pergosian. So he also can't afford to throw him in prison because of that same reason. So he's backed himself in a bit of a corner where it's like, this is what he needs to achieve. And yes, it might make him look bad. But at the end of the day, he's being very pragmatic given the goal that he wants to achieve.

I think one of the strangest things about this whole episode is that typically, whether it's a mutiny or a crushed mutiny, there's a clear winner and a clear loser, but instead what we have are two about faces, right? Pergosian did an about face. He staged whatever one call it, a mutiny, an armed bargaining tactic, and then advances halfway to Moscow and

turns around 170 miles outside of the city. That is a literal about face. He turned his face around. And then there's Putin, who goes on television and calls this man, his friend, who he is essentially created, right? The monster invented by Dr. Frankenstein in the lab, calls this man a traitor, and then hours later at least appears to cut a deal that allows the traitor to escape to Belarus without penalty and hang out in a hotel. A hotel that, by the way, I should say, as I understand it, has no windows, which is very important because most people that cross Putin either end up dead drinking tea or thrown outside of a window in a sort of classic Russian defenestration situation. Which I, just quick aside, you and I are commenting on this in the middle of the event. And it is, of course, possible that given how fast this has moved, 12 hours from now, there's some other detail that emerges that completely changes some of the contours. I mean, Pergosian might not live another week, for all we know. It's conceivable that Putin banished him to Belarus with the understanding, little wink wink, that he's going to be executed before the month is out. So it's not entirely clear that Putin did a mirror about face here. But I just want to land there to see if you have a reaction to it. It just is very strange to me that both these men came away from this encounter with a very clear about face. You're absolutely right. They both came away looking bad. They both came away looking like they backed down. But yes, I think there is absolutely the idea out there that this isn't over and that we could see Pergosian later this week, next week. Wait, he just disappeared. Where'd he go? Like, I thought, you know, and because Putin has a reputation for doing these type of things. And so it's still possible that that could happen. However, and this is where, when that happens, this is to kind of bring it back to the point I was just talking about, about Putin needing the Wagner group. He's only going to do that once he's sure that he still has what he needs, right? So if he can get a sense that he can still have the personnel from the Wagner group, that he can still use them in the way that he needs to use them in Eastern Ukraine, then suddenly, Pergosian maybe isn't as valuable to him, right? And he doesn't need them anymore. Now, that's the one possibility. But there's another possibility which is that, and maybe Pergosian himself knows this. Pergosian knew he could get away with this, because Putin needs him. Putin needs him because of the things we were just talking about earlier

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regarding the criminal connections. All the things that he has, he also knows like lots of like, Putin's own connections. He is one who is very good at making the system work in Russia, right? In terms of the corruption and working around the corruption so forth. So it might have been a case where Pergosian knows he's one of the few people that actually can do something like that and Putin can't do anything about it. And so that might have been part of the reason why he felt like he could push and send his soldiers. He's like, nah, nah, but Putin can say whatever he wants. I have him over a barrel. He can't do this. The problem is, is that does he really have him over a barrel? Time will tell. Again, if in two weeks he's gone, then it turns out maybe he overestimated his value. Let's talk about the larger implications here. First, the war itself. And then second, let's talk a little bit about what this suggests about Putin's power and the capacity of the Russian state. Let's go to the war. You've already mentioned this a few times, but the Wagner group was understood to be one of the more efficient and effective units in the Russian military. And the fact that they at least appear to have lost their leader, whether that leader was a direct commander of the military is hard to know, but he was at least, you know, you described as a kind of a node connecting criminal parts who in their aggregate seem to have been doing some kind of effective work for the Russian military. Now, clearly that has been destabilized. What do you think this speaks to in terms of Russia's ability to fight this war? So I think this really goes to the heart of the whole situation. And, you know, so far we've been talking at the micro, right? Just trying to understand what happened this weekend and where it fits. But I think it's really important at this point to pull it to the macro, right? And the macro is really something that I spent a lot of time thinking about is kind of like, why does an event like this happen, regardless of the specifics? Now, what is this event? So this event that happened this weekend was some sort of internal turmoil in a regime or a government that is fighting a war. That is the event. And those events, as much as, you know, there's all these unique and weird things that we're talking about regarding this one event, the idea that a government can have these internal upheavals in the midst of a war is actually something that can happen quite a bit. Of course, it's happened most famously in Russia itself in 1917, right? That in the midst of World War I, due to the hardship of that war, the toll it was taking on the Russian economy, the toll it was taking on the Russian military, they, and then combine that with Germany taking advantage of that and sending by rail car, Lenin to, you know, into Russia, that then enabled the collapse of the government, the Bolshevik Revolution. And of course, then that's where, you know, long story short, the Soviet Union eventually emerges, right? But that's where the Tsar is overthrown. And that happened due to the tensions that were caused within the society by fighting this war that was not going well for Russia. And of course, that's just one of the most famous examples of this, but there's lots of examples of this happening. So in a macro sense, that's the big thing, I think, to take away from this event is that it points to the fact that you have Russia fighting this war that is taking a major toll on its economy, taking a major toll on its military, and it's not going the way it was supposed to go. It's not going according to plan. There is no way they can win it. I've been saying this quite a bit. Russia can't win this war, but that doesn't mean they have to lose it, right? They can continue to fight it. But what that does is if you're in the middle of a non-winnable situation, you're going to start creating all these type of tensions, disgruntlement, and so forth. And it might come from a mercenary wing of your military. It might come from someone in the military itself. It may come from someone

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who's not even in the military. It might come from social uprisings that could be happening, right? So there's all sorts of ways in which a society and a government can start to fall apart if there is a war that's putting a big strain on its economy. And that is, in a macro sense, what we observed this weekend, and really what we have to be thinking about when thinking about what happened

this weekend. One thought I had is I was prepping some of the questions for you. And I think this was directly inspired by some of our conversations. Some news outlets are reporting that the U.S. knew weeks in advance that Pregodian was planning something along these lines. And in me, it raises

the question, why didn't Putin see this coming? Why didn't he have the foresight to head this off before his favorite private military commander had marched 200 miles outside of Moscow's border? And what it reminded me of that we've talked about is that dictators sometimes coup-proof, that is, COUP-proof, they prevent coups by eliminating all of their non-sycophantic advisors. And as a result, they're only surrounded by the yes men and the yes women who will tell them

good news and that will tell them things they can celebrate rather than tell them things they'll be hard to swallow. And maybe one reason that Putin didn't see this coming is that some of the people,

some of the counterintelligence people, who might have had some inkling, as our CIA theoretically did, that Pregodian was about to launch this weird protest mutiny, is that it goes to the fact that he has consistently, from the beginning, from the month that this war started, been surrounded by this cocoon of self-imposed disinformation. He has operated terribly and architecture a terrible war in part because he has eliminated the people around him who would otherwise give him accurate information that would allow him to militate a successful war. And the question here in this comment, I guess, is why didn't Putin see this coming? But it just reminded me of all these conversations that we have had about all the things that Putin did not see coming because he over-cooproofed his internal cabinet. That's exactly right. And this gets to an idea that Caitlin Talmage has put forward, a professor at Georgetown University has put forward this idea, dictators do this, right? They coup-proof their military and that can lead to poor military performance. And that is exactly like, this is a classic case of exactly that, right? That the Russian military is not performing in a way that you would expect a major military to be performing, but it's because of, you know, it's a dictator's army and the dictator's more concerned about the army turning against him than he's concerned about the army actually performing well. And yes, we've seen this over and over again. Now, that's not a macro. There's also the specifics of this case, which is that the individual in the, quote, inner advisory military circle of Putin and someone who has been giving, who was giving a lot of the like, oh, yes, this is going well and everything is great, was his minister of defense, Shoigu, right? And he is someone who has been going, becoming less and less prominent. He's someone that people are kind of saying like Putin is kind of like, kind of pushing more and more to the side. Reason-wise, because the war has not been going as well. You know, you can only lie to him so much before he can be like, well, why don't we have control of the country? Why don't we have this? You know, Putin has had to come on and make statements. So he's aware that things have not gone as much as he wanted it to go. And I think that the key person who maybe would have told him more of like, hey,

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promotion is going to do this, don't trust him, is the very person that Putin was like, no, no, I don't want to listen to you. But it was for the reasons of I don't like how this war is going. And maybe, maybe even Shoigu may have even tried to tell him that and he'd been like, no, no, you're just making excuses. You're making more excuses about why this war is not going well. So I think that it's a combination of the coup-proofing we talked about. But it's also the idea that Putin feels like there's a lot of blaming going on. There's a, you know, within his inner circle, there's people blaming others. And so he may have heard this and even just dismissed it as, no, you're just trying to deflect blame. You're just trying to say, oh, no, they're going to do this. And you're trying to make up reasons for why you have failed. So I think that's also a likely plausible reason that he was surprised by this. Of course, let's also keep in mind, he may not have been all that surprised, right? You know, there's still that possibility that he did know this was going to happen. Maybe he didn't think it would be carried out. Maybe, you know, thought, oh, yeah, I know he's upset and I know this, but there's no way he's going to invade. Or that, you know, he actually knew it was going to happen. Again, I think that's very unlikely, but there's still that it's still possible. No, that's a great point. And this is all, as we're trying to mind read Pragodjan or certainly Putin, this is all through a glass darkly. We are guessing at what these people are thinking based on little tiny details that trickle through the news, which may or may not have the full ring of truth. Last question for you is about the path forward. And I see two very different paths emerging from this moment. One is that the Pragodjan revolt is a signal of destabilization in the Putin regime. And that we need to consider the possibility that this is, you know, this is a canary in a coal mine. We could see further political collapse or political instability in the next few months as more people are keen to the idea that the Russian military operation has been a total failure that speaks terribly of the quality of Russian leadership. There's another possibility here. And it's one that you've raised. It's that the literature suggests that dictators, when they're dealing with internal issues, rather than say, oh, well, I'm getting a sense that some of my underlings aren't entirely happy with my leadership. And therefore, I'm going to totally change my ways. No, they're dictators for a reason. They are unbelievably confident in their own abilities. And ironically, internal division causes them to double down on the war effort to prove that they were right and the rebellion was wrong. So I guess I said those are two different paths, political collapse and a doubling down on the war. Theoretically, they could happen at the same time.

The war could be doubled down, Don. And we could see cracks in the Putin regime.

What are you looking for in the next few months?

No, that was a great way of kind of laying out what are the possibilities.

And you're right, these things could all kind of work together. We could see, for example, we could see a change in leadership. Putin could, someone could happen, Putin could go out.

And I think this is something that folks need to be prepared for, which is that,

as much as we like to call this Putin's war, it's not just Putin's war. There is a very much a hardline view within the Russian foreign policy establishment, the Russian military establishment.

There is this hardline view that is very sympathetic to the ideas that are motivating the war in Ukraine. Putin has his own particular take on it, but I'm not sure that if suddenly, if there was this internal turmoil and there's now a new leader, they're going to say, and therefore,

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we're going to stop fighting this war. I think that there's the possibility that it could actually continue the war. That's very interesting to me. Just impact that a bit more. Even outside of Putin's specific justification, what are the other motivations in that circle for the Ukraine invasion? I think that for Putin, there's this notion of wanting to be Peter the Great. People were pointing out, he's going from being Peter the Great to potentially being Nicholas the Second, meaning the Russian Tsar that it was, of course, overthrown in 1917. The idea, though, is there is, within the Russian foreign policy establishment, and this has been the case since the early 90s, really since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there's the phrase the near abroad. The near abroad is the phrase that is used to refer to all the former Soviet republics. Of course, they use that phrase to connote that this is our sphere of influence. This is where we have control. These are our countries to determine their fates. We find to let them be independent as long as we can continue to control and dominate them in our region. Now, the problem was, they lost the Baltic states. Baltic states got into NATO, and that was it. Belarus is the ideal member of the near abroad. This is a country that is, it's an independent country, but it has a very close relationship with Russia as a strong ally, et cetera. That is the ideal of it. Of course, Ukraine has been a country that's in danger of moving more towards the West. This can get into the whole debate about, is it the West pushing in on this, and that's something we've talked about before, and we can talk about more. But the whole idea is that there's concern that Ukraine is going towards the West. That is something that is not just unique to Putin. That is something that is more widely shared as a concern within the Russian foreign policy establishment is wanting to maintain control the near abroad. That would lead to a desire to want to continue this war, to continue this fighting of it. That would be the scenario under which, even without Putin power, you could still see this war continuing. Having said that, let's deal with the doubling down idea. This draws on an idea called gambling for resurrection that we've talked about before on the show. A really great articulation of that is by a professor at the University of Rochester, Hein Gohmans, where he wrote this book about this idea of why, specifically he used the cases of World War I, but it's like why didn't the countries, especially the autocratic regimes, why didn't they just sit there and say, you know what, this isn't going, we're not going to win. Let's just stop. Let's just stop fighting. Why are we continuing to throw personnel into the trenches? Let's just stop fighting. But the whole idea is that you as an autocratic leader, and Gohmans has done a lot of research on this more systematically, not just World War I, but that autocratic leaders typically do not have a great post leadership fate, especially if they were a leader who is associated with a major failure, such as a losing of a war. What they can do, what we're specifically talking about, is they're not going off to write their memoir. They're probably going to get executed in some way. And so that leads them to say, I got to double down. I cannot afford to lose power. We can't afford to lose this war. And moreover, to your point, what you were just saying, Derek, is I also need to prove that I know what I'm doing. And the best way to do that is to continue to fight this to show that we have not lost. And my concern about going forward is that even though people have looked at this event this weekend and say, hey, that's a glimmer of hope, maybe there'll be some disruption. And that could lead Russia to Putin to have his own moment of clarity and say, oh, what am I doing? This is just cut. No, I think you're going to see the opposite. I think you're

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going to see Putin double down. You're going to say my resolve has never been stronger. And we are going to try to continue this war to push against those who are pushing against us. And so that's what I think is going to be happening going forward. Well, Paul, obviously, I hope you're wrong, but I think there's something to the idea that a lot of people saw a criminal turning against his creator and marching troops toward Moscow and thought immediately this is 1917. We are finally seeing the beginning of the end of the Putin regime. And while, of course, any given week, given how incompetent this regime is, could theoretically be the beginning of the end of his regime, I'm just not prepared at all to believe that this is the beginning of the end for Putin. And I unfortunately think it is just as likely that he responds in the way that I guess I would suppose I'd expect a dictator to respond, which is to take a crisis like this. And in the act of proving that it isn't an actual crisis to his legitimacy, double down rather than lean into the criticism that, oh, the war is being executed very well, so maybe we should just stop it and wrap it up. It doesn't look to me like we're near the end just yet. Thank you, as always, for coming back on the show. And I'd like to say I hope we talk to you again soon. It's always somewhat depressing when we speak, but we will, in all likelihood, have you back again. Thanks, Paul. Thank you, Derek. Always a pleasure.