

DEFENSE & SECURITY

What The Death of Prigozhin Means For The Russian Regime And The War In Ukraine

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The killing of Prigozhin has understandably elicited many analyses of Russia as a lawless mafia state. There's something to that interpretation. But, it's also somewhat sweeping and risks caricaturing the Putin regime. In fact, Putin often prefers to rule through law, and in particular, he often although not always seeks to punish his domestic opponents by law. The clearest example is Aleksey Navalny, who was tried and sentenced (albeit of course in a show trial rather than a fair proceeding). Prosecuting his domestic opponents allows the regime to present itself as the lawful face of constitutional order. In this context, the assassination of Prigozhin could be seen almost as an admission of weakness. It implicitly acknowledges that Prigozhin, unlike Navalny or any other opponent, has escaped the category of criminal subject and instead become something akin to an external enemy, such as Ukraine or NATO. Putin may have thought that he had to kill Prigozhin spectacularly to show that he was still capable of subduing insurrection, but the fact that he is now faced with that necessity is itself an admission that he can no longer keep his house in order.

Ukrainian responses to the killing of Prigozhin have been mostly positive, if not gleeful. The specific reason for this response is probably that Prigozhin was seen in Ukraine as a formidable opponent, whose loss will weaken the Russian war effort. Beyond that, in line with the interpretation I offer above, the killing of Prigozhin (particularly in such a dramatic manner) underlines Russia's political disarray, casting doubt on its ability to achieve its war aims of subjugating and recolonizing Ukraine.

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