

# THE CURRENT DIGEST

## OF THE RUSSIAN PRESS

SUPPLEMENT NO. 26A

July 2023

### Letter From the Publisher

In late June 2023, the Putin regime faced its most serious threat ever when Wagner mercenary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin seized critical facilities in the Southern Military District and led a group of armed soldiers on a “March for Justice” that brought them within a hundred miles of Moscow. Through a deal purportedly brokered by Belarussian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, Prigozhin’s life and safety remained intact.

How did Prigozhin, the “Kremlin chef,” ever become so powerful? How have Russian officials and media outlets responded to this extraordinary situation? What fate lies ahead for the Wagner group, the “special military operation” in Ukraine, and the carefully constructed house that Putin built?

Read our special full-color, 16-page supplement to *The Current Digest of the Russian Press* (CDRP) to find some unexpected answers and inside perspectives, courtesy of the editorial staff of *Novaya gazeta*. Those who peruse these pages will find relevant history, telling quotations, incisive commentary and unforgettable images. To the independent journalists who assembled and produced this relevant and timely material, we offer our sincere thanks and respect.

This abbreviated version of the Prigozhin supplement is available free of charge. The full version is provided to all current CDRP subscribers, and can also be accessed on a pay-per-view basis through [East View on Demand](#). We appreciate your continued interest in news from Russia!

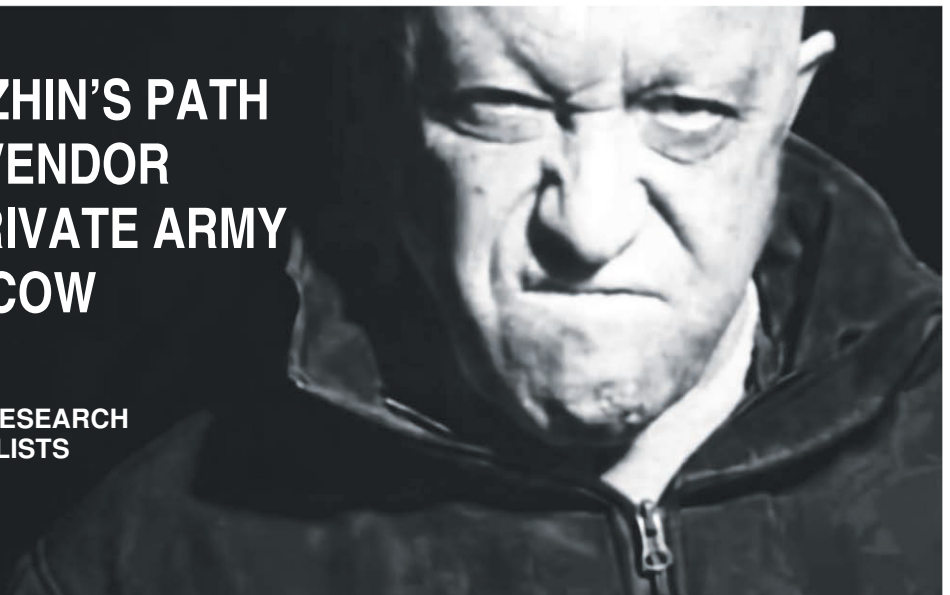
Laurence H. Bogoslaw  
Chief Editor and Publishing Director  
East View Press

## YEVGENY PRIGOZHIN’S PATH FROM HOT DOG VENDOR TO HEAD OF A PRIVATE ARMY MOVING ON MOSCOW

**SUPPLEMENT.**

THE RESULTS OF 10 YEARS’ RESEARCH  
BY NOVAYA GAZETA JOURNALISTS

**PP. 2–10**



# NO CHEF

## **YEVGENY PRIGOZHIN'S PATH FROM HOT DOG VENDOR TO HEAD OF A PRIVATE ARMY MOVING ON MOSCOW. EACH STEP OF THAT PATH IS SOAKED WITH BLOOD**

June 23 and 24 were probably Russia's most alarming days of the whole armed conflict with Ukraine. Barricades were erected, roads were blocked, and troops were called up in alarm. And paradoxically, the Armed Forces of Ukraine had nothing to do with it. The uproar in the Russian state was raised by our own—people whom the official rhetoric had long been accustomed to calling heroes: PMC Wagner.

What can we say? The Ministry of Defense's reports on losses, the last of which was made by Sergey Shoygu back in September, never once spoke of aircraft destroyed by Ukrainians. And now only the official media were announcing two military helicopters and one airplane had been shot down. And in a single day. It's no accident that they called Wagner one of the most battle-worthy formations fighting in Ukraine.

The Russian state had cultivated the out-of-control private military company itself—Vladimir Putin himself admitted that on June 27 when he said that in the year of military action, 86 billion 262 million rubles had been paid out of the national budget to Wagner to cover expenses and incentives, and the PMC's founder Yevgeny Prigozhin had earned another 80 billion through his Concord company for food deliveries, some of it to the regular army.

Strictly speaking, the whole story did start with catering. *Novaya gazeta* tells how the Petersburg hot dog merchant, after serving time for theft, robbery, fraud, and involving a minor in criminal activity, gained the head of state's trust, set up his own army, and sent it first to Syria and Africa, then to Ukraine, and finally to Moscow.



## Chapter I.

**THE SLIPPERY  
FRANK**

In which  
Yevgeny Prigozhin  
robs people, cooks hot  
dogs, and meets  
Vladimir Putin

On the evening of March 20, 1980, four young people, three of them apparently about 19 to 25 years old (two guys and a girl)—Aleksey Bushman, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Valentina Makeko—approached a Ms. Korolëva on Sailor Zheleznyak Street in St. Petersburg. With them was also a minor named Kopayev. They were an unruly group who loved to hang out at the Ocean restaurant in the city's Waterfront District. Real Tarantino characters.

By then, Bushman and Prigozhin had already been convicted: a series of thefts, including break-ins. But how could the woman, who was just walking past them, know this? Nothing portended trouble. Typical small talk: Makeko asked Korolëva for a cigarette. But when the woman opened her purse to take out a pack, the group attacked her.

Prigozhin, according to the case file, supposedly started choking her, and Makeko took out a knife. They didn't have to cut her: Korolëva passed out from the choking. They dragged her off the street and took her shoes and gold earrings. With that, they disappeared.

By then Prigozhin already had to hide: that morning, according to investigators' data, he would have stolen 250 rubles from a Mr. Kovalenko. He promised to get him jeans and other scarce items, but in the end just fled with the money. And they spent them playing at the Ocean. By the way, things were generally going pretty well for the friends: six days earlier, as related in court, Prigozhin, Bushman, and Makeko had broken in the door of 28 Bryantsev Street, apartment 157, and taken crystal ware, candles, a set of pens, loan bonds, and of course money. The total value

of the theft came to 1610 rubles. For clarity, one ruble at the time was worth approximately 290 of today's rubles [about \$3.22].

Those were glorious times for the wild ones. But the group loused up the Korolëva robbery—those involved were identified and arrested. Leningrad's Zhdanov District Court sentenced Prigozhin, now elevated to the title Hero of Russia, to 13 years in prison.

"It worked out here that lots of people spent time in prison. For them, it was a serious school of life," he later recalled his time in prison, admitting that he never did manage to get a college education. Prison became his university, although not in Shalamov's sense, but meaning the foundation of his world view.

However, Prigozhin didn't have to serve his full term: in 1988, after spending seven years in a penal colony, he requested clemency. And he got it. He was released in 1990.

Those were hard times. The Soviet Union was collapsing, and people were lost, unable to find their way in the new reality. But Prigozhin was not one of those. Neither he himself nor his friends ever explained how exactly he got the money to open a chain of hot dog stands in St. Petersburg, but fast food made him money, and the customers kept coming. Prigozhin felt that a Soviet person looked at what to a Western consumer were the most ordinary goods and services as something alien. And he started getting into "alien" businesses one after another: grilling franks was followed by the opening of a wine bar/store, then the Old Customs House restaurant designed for the upper crust, and then the New Island floating restaurant. The decision to put the restaurant afloat was actually a breakthrough, and Prigozhin threw himself all-in to the business: he spent half a million dollars to refurbish the time-worn and rusted steamer *Moscow-177*, transforming its Spartan interiors into an elite club. Members of the St. Petersburg business elite and politicians, including employees of the mayor's office where Vladimir Putin worked at the time, started coming to the New Island.

We don't know for certain when he first met Prigozhin, but in 2001 the current President of Russia dined at the New Island with his French counterpart Jacques Chirac. The first photographs of Prigozhin with Putin ap-

peared in 2002, when the floating restaurant hosted George W. Bush and his wife Laura. On that occasion, Yevgeny Prigozhin served the heads of state personally.

However, his acquaintance with world leaders still did not make him a national figure. And Prigozhin's position, albeit fairly high, did not satisfy his ambition.

## Chapter II.

**COMPLIMENTS  
OF THE CHEF**

In which  
Yevgeny Prigozhin is  
accused of poisoning  
schoolchildren, but he  
makes money off  
them and the military

The general public first heard of the businessman in late August 2011, when cooks and dishwashers began being fired en masse from schools in southeast and northern Moscow. The people lost their jobs because a new "owner" appeared in the school cafeterias—the Concord company, still little known to anyone at the time, won the bid to supply food to the educational institutions. At today's prices, the amount of the contract seems slight—1.6 billion rubles [\$17.7 million as of July 2023]. But that was just the beginning.

Prigozhin's public debut proved unsuccessful: the firings were no big deal, but the schoolchildren weren't getting fed at the start of the school year. Concord simply couldn't equip the cafeterias in time. The businessman had to explain himself: "Since we were charged with installing equipment and all the other technological processes, not everything went smoothly, unfortunately. Some places have problems with electricity, some places have other problems.... We'll get it all fixed. So there may still be some problem areas in a few schools for a few days. But I think we'll solve them by September 10. Even sooner. ...

It's just the preparation time was short. Our competition to organize school catering ended only two weeks ago. ... We were a little short of time in some places," he explained haltingly.

Later it became clear that the problem was not just with supply delays. The St. Petersburg schools, whose children Prigozhin had been feeding without much fuss since before his arrival in Moscow, decided to file complaints against the businessman.

"Everything's monotonous, the menu's cyclic. We constantly get orange fish balls and tomato gravy. And some kind of white cutlets. Modified soy? We don't know what kind of product that is. Convenience foods. And we're tired of eating them. It's impossible to eat the exact same thing all the time."—Complaint from School No. 67.

"They might just not bring the food. At times, we've had nothing to feed the children. Fairly often. At first, about once a week. They wriggled out of it however they could."—School No. 185.

"The cutlets are completely inedible: after prolonged storage, they lose their flavor. Many children, and adults too, couldn't eat the entrées, especially those cutlets, they got heartburn from them. A lot of it ended up in the garbage."—School No. 197.

Seeing that the firestorm of criticism was too strong, Prigozhin chose a tried-and-true Russian tactic—he simply stopped responding. And he kept grabbing markets. After debugging the school system, starting to feed the children empty and tasteless but stable food, the businessman offered his services to hospitals and the army. In late 2012, his entities won 92 of 100 billion rubles allocated for feeding the military in 2013 and 2014. Since then, the cash flow from the Ministry of Defense to Prigozhin has not run dry.

If the state had understood where unlimited funding of the smiling St. Petersburg businessman with the criminal past would lead, it might have, at least for self-preservation, stopped giving him money. Especially since an excuse turned up in 2018.

In December, hundreds of children living in southeastern Moscow started showing similar symptoms: vomiting, gastric distress, and high temperatures. Many had to be hospitalized in serious condition, and some ended up in intensive care. The prosecutor's audit report said: "The cause of the group illness was consumption of a food product containing *E. coli* bacteria." All the victims had one thing in common: they attended kindergartens whose food was supplied by Prigozhin companies.

The epidemic investigation confirmed that the cause was substandard food. And there it seems that they could have canceled all contracts with Prigozhin. But they decided to hush up the incident: Rospotrebnadzor (the Federal Service for Consumer Rights Protection and Human Welfare Oversight) fined Concord 2 million rubles, 30 parents were awarded 10,000 rubles' compensation, and Prigozhin voluntarily reimbursed some for pain and suffering and medical expenses. Everything ended there. The business continued to gain speed. From 2011 to 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin's food empire won government orders worth 845 billion rubles. The profit from that business formed the foundation of his financial power.

Ivan ZHILIN'S  
reporting continues  
PAGES 4–5 ⇨



The first photos of Prigozhin with Putin appeared in 2002 when he served the Russian President's meeting with George W. Bush and his wife Laura in his floating restaurant



# NO CHEF

⇨ PAGES 2–3

## Chapter III.

### OH, MY BOT!

In which Prigozhin sets up a troll farm and his own media empire, starts a war with the independent media, and sends his agents there

In the fall of 2015, Olga learned she was pregnant. By then she had already been working for two years at the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, in a spacious office at 55 Savushkin St. The woman did not reflect too much on what she was doing; she just wrote posts and comments on social media. For that, she was paid a livable wage of 40,000 rubles a month. The company's bad reputation was no concern of the rank-and-file employee.

Olga worked at a troll farm, a real machine for producing rah-rah patriotism. They created an image of a great country: hundreds of people followed the guidelines to praise the authorities' decisions on social media, spread the ideas of "necessary" philosophers from Dugin to Ilyin, trolled dissenters and made inroads in comments on independent media publications. An enemy could change course: today, Turkey shoots down a Russian plane and its President Erdoğan becomes an object of hatred, but tomorrow Putin chats with Erdoğan and the latter is transformed back to a "reliable partner."

That didn't bother Olga. She needed benefits from her employer because she was going on maternity leave. However, the personnel department's response surprised her: "We don't pay benefits here," they declared, hinting that there was a long line of applicants for the woman's job.

Attempts to get justice turned into a need to save herself—HR and security literally hounded Olga, demanding she sign papers saying she was being let go "at her own request" and had no claims against the company. She wouldn't sign anything. Then strangers started calling her husband and telling him that some "radically inclined comrades from Ukraine" could hurt both Olga and him. And those weren't empty threats.

Besides comments, the troll farm maintained a public "Who's Who" file in which they entered the data of journalists, bloggers, and politicians who had spoken negatively about the authorities. Unpleasant things often happened to those who wound up there: people were threatened, they were attacked, their cars were burned. From January to August 2016 alone, 13 people from the farm's list were attacked and poisoned in St. Petersburg. And Olga knew that. Luckily, nothing bad ultimately happened to her family, they were left alone.

Yevgeny Prigozhin set up the troll farm in

2013. On the one hand, it gave him political clout, because his propaganda machine was almost as good as television, and it was "popular" too—"the truth about what's going on" came from "regular folks" through dozens of fake accounts, not from Vladimir Solovyov at the villa he had at the time on Lake Como. On the other hand, the trolls burnished Prigozhin's own image in conflicts, casting any information in the light he needed, creating the appearance in the public space that the majority thought whatever suited their host.

But Prigozhin could not limit himself to "public support." That same year, a dozen "patriotic" sites appeared on the Internet, telling of Russia's successes and the West's problems, and harshly exposing the "fifth column." The most noticeable of these were the Federal News Agency (*RIA FAN*), "The Economy Today," and "Politics Today." They were quickly picked up by Yandex News, whose ticker also became a propaganda tool over time. Thus began—even before all the Roskomnadzor (Federal Service for Information Technology and Communication Oversight) blocks—the "patriotic" seizure of the Russian Internet.

The question remained: What to do with the independent media? At the time, the state still behaved fairly liberally. The scale of the threat had to be proven. So a young woman named Masha Kuprashevich appeared on the doorstep of Novaya gazeta's Moscow office. She came from St. Petersburg, 700 kilometers away, and asked for an internship in the advertising department. She was even willing to work for free, simply because she "really love[d] Novaya gazeta." The editors agreed—of course, they gave her a percentage of advertising contracts.

But soon the editors received a document—a printout of our site seeking an intern in the advertising department, which for some reason bore the stamp... of Yevgeny Prigozhin. We started to look into Masha's biography and learned that the work record she had submitted to Novaya gazeta was not her only one, and that our new intern had a permanent job with Concord's PR service.

The editors decided to monitor what was happening and even give Masha a little leeway—she was given access to internal network folders containing no valuable information. Kuprashevich proved undiscriminating and downloaded their entire contents. She sent what she had downloaded on removable hard disks to an agent of Concord's security service, Georgy Bubnov.

The intern also had a thoroughly work-related problem: she wasn't very good at landing advertising contracts. And in order to prove her indispensability, she resorted to another stupid move: she invited Novaya gazeta to advertise Prigozhin's "Newspaper of Newspapers," much of whose content amounted to "exposés," or rather to attacks on our own reporters. Kuprashevich was fired. Of course, Yevgeny Prigozhin was wrong to send to a public policy media outlet someone who was completely uninterested in politics and didn't apply herself to her work.



Masha Kuprashevich



But it soon became clear that the “Kremlin chef” had sent “spies” to Dozhd Television as well, and even to the Russian office of Google. However, they couldn’t find anything of interest; like Kuprashevich, they just wasted their boss’s money. Sometimes Prigozhin’s agents totally invented events and sent them up to the Patriot media group’s sites. For example, Novaya gazeta reviewer Boris Vishnevsky’s supposed solicitation of students at Herzen University, to whom, according to the Prigozhinites’ concoction, he promised passing grades, although he had never taught them at all.

But the “visible” results lay elsewhere—in provocations against people Prigozhin found inconvenient.

On January 15, 2013, Novaya gazeta correspondent Andrey Sukhotin was arrested in Moscow. A criminal case had been opened against him for “public theft of another’s property with the use of violence.” The charge was made up: the “victim” Andrey Vishnyakov stated that Sukhotin, along with a group of young people, had robbed him in Potapov Alley not far from our editorial office and stolen his cell phone. However, surveillance camera footage did not confirm this at all, and Vishnyakov’s testimony contained serious inconsistencies: for example, before the attack, he had supposedly traveled from University metro station to Kuzminki station via Krasnyye vorota station—anyone familiar with the Moscow Metro map could see that was absurd. Several months after the criminal case was opened, the case was closed.

Later, the editors learned that Vishnyakov was Prigozhin’s man. The owner of the troll farm just needed to get rid of the reporter who was (among other things) investigating thefts in the military. But he failed.

Over time, Prigozhin’s people began acting totally overtly. For example, amid the conflict with the businessman, our editorial office received parcels containing a funeral wreath and a severed ram’s head, and our building in Potapov Alley came under chemical attack.

The Prigozhinites treated others in a similar manner—for example, the Sochi vlogger Anton Grishchenko, who was beaten for publishing a caricature of Vladimir Putin. One former employee of Yevgeny Prigozhin told us himself about that crime, after which he was forced to stage its theft, worried about



persecution by his former employer. And he had reason to worry. Oleg Simonov, who worked for Prigozhin, was involved in poisoning Lyubov Sobol’s husband Sergey Mokhov, who was shortly later found dead.

But big money and show loyalty to the authorities unfortunately enable one to stay afloat regardless of fairy-tale nonsense and public violation of the foundations of the state itself. Especially since the inquiry into

nonsense covered by patriotism, by the start of Prigozhin’s ascent of Mt. Olympus, took shape in a country on the threshold of a historic conflict with the Western world and its closest neighbor, Ukraine.

## Chapter IV.

**EYES AND EARS**

In which Prigozhin follows Putin and Obama and organizes a gay parade

In March, 2013, four Concord waiters were sent for lie detector tests. The company’s security service asked them all the same six questions:

- Have you secretly sent an outsider any information on banquets in the Kremlin?
- Have you taken photos of menus for banquets at Novo-Ogarëvo?
- Have you secretly sent anyone the menu for the banquet that took place March 14, 2013 at Novo-Ogarëvo?
- Have you posted the menu from the banquet at Novo-Ogarëvo on the Internet?
- Have you ever received money to disclose information to an outsider?
- Have you posted information on the Kremlin banquet on the Internet?

The questioning regarded one of President Putin’s meetings with foreign leaders. And although the waiters denied that they had sent information, the polygraph found at least one response from each of them to be false. Their later fates are unknown.

Prigozhin’s entities have always been fairly private and used questionable methods of solving problems. But it turned out awkwardly with the waiters: It was revealed shortly after the questioning that the large-scale leakage of data on Vladimir Putin’s negotiations with other heads of state came from Yevgeny Prigozhin himself. Hackers who broke into his email published “reports” implying that subordinate cooks had relayed to him all details of first-hand conversations heard while serving food. But they couldn’t learn anything important: for example, they reported to the chef that Putin insistently advised Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro not to nationalize companies in his country, or that Putin doesn’t consistently get a full night’s sleep, doesn’t read the papers, and sometimes drives his own car.

Even though the fact that the collection of information on the president had been made public, the state looked the other way.

During the 2013 G-20 Summit in St. Petersburg, Prigozhin kept tabs on Barack Obama as well. But in his own style, of course: We don’t know if he managed to learn anything valuable, but he did manage to get into the history books.

Upon Obama’s arrival in St. Pete, he was met at Pulkovo-2 airport by a crowd of people carrying LGBT paraphernalia and signs reading, “Obama Is Our President” and “Obama Is With Us.” The American leader paid no attention to them, but soon the “Newspaper of Newspapers” published material on “the true aims of the American president’s visit, which supposedly amounted not to a meeting with other national leaders, but to a meeting with Russian gays, lesbians, and transsexuals. It soon became clear that in fact, members of the St. Petersburg LGBT community had organized no demonstration; the people who “met” Barack Obama were simply a crowd hired by Prigozhin subordinates for 4000 rubles.

But the state still decided to assign this man the sensitive and dangerous task of assembling his own army.

Ivan ZHILIN’S  
reporting continues  
PAGES 6–7 ⇨

# ABOUT *THE CURRENT DIGEST OF THE RUSSIAN PRESS*

The *Current Digest of the Russian Press* was founded by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council in 1949, under the name The Current Digest of the Soviet Press. The journal has been published uninterrupted since that time. The Digest's mission is to provide the reader with a broad picture of the news presented to the Russian public, be it domestic, international or related to other post-Soviet states.

\* \* \*

Leo Gruliow, *Founder*

**Managing Editor:** Xenia Grushetsky

**Editor:** Lucy Gunderson

**Editor:** Steven McGrath

**Proofreader:** Matthew Larson

**Director of Publishing:** Laurence Bogoslaw

ISSN 2159-3612 (print) ISSN 2159-3639 (online)

\* \* \*

**Current 2023 prices (subject to change without notice):**

*Institutions:* Print \$3,063 Online \$2,975 Print+Online \$3,315

*Individual - US:* Print \$270 Online \$259 Print+Online \$314

*Individual - non-US:* Print \$368 Online \$259 Print+Online \$415

\* \* \*

**For subscriptions, contact:**

East View Information Services, Inc., 10601 Wayzata Blvd, Minnetonka, MN 55305-1515 USA

Phone: (952) 252-1201, (800) 477-1005.

E-mail: [periodicals@eastview.com](mailto:periodicals@eastview.com).

\* \* \*

## ABOUT THIS SUPPLEMENT

All textual and graphic material in Supplement No. 26A comes from the Russian publication TA SAMAYA NOVAYA GAZETA, No. 14, 2023.

**Translation and layout:** Paul Gallagher

Copying or use of these materials in creating other works without the express written permission of East View Information Services is prohibited.

