

# Icarus(sia): The Myth about a Mercenary that flew too close to the Sun

A qualitative case-study about Russian use of *theatrical  
vengeance*

# Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the further refinement of the theoretical framework about *theatrical vengeance* by performing a qualitative analysis on a single case - the highly publicized murder of Yevgeny Prigozhin - using the theoretical framework in question. The analytical approach is inspired by the congruence method, evaluating the explanatory potential of *theatrical vengeance* by assessing if and to what extent the expectations derived from the framework can be used to understand the case. The analysis uses empirical observations retrieved from the news coverage of the line of events which preceded and followed Prigozhin's death. The analysis concludes that *theatrical vengeance* indeed is a viable explanatory framework in relation to the Prigozhin case, and that the set of expectations derived from it contributed to the overall understanding of the case. This, in turn, suggests that *theatrical vengeance* in the future may serve as a valuable explanatory model for the study of other cases featuring dramatic assassinations involving Russian dissidents.

Key words: theatrical vengeance, Russia, qualitative case study, political signaling, Yevgeny Prigozhin

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# 1 Introduction

‘With these wings you will fly like a bird,’ Daedalus told his son, ‘but be careful. Make sure you do not fly too close to the Sun. If you do, the wax that holds the feathers together will melt.’ (Understanding Myths and Legends 17 Daedalus and Icarus, n.d.)

On June 23, 2023, mercenary Yevgeny Prigozhin gathers his private Wagner army and crosses the border from Ukraine into Russia. The entire world watches as presumably 25 000 men, under Prigozhin’s command, initiate an armed mutiny directed at Moscow (The Associated Press, 2023g). The rebellion lasts for merely one day before a deal is struck and Prigozhin announces the withdrawal of troops. Experts agree that Prigozhin’s armed rebellion, despite its shortness, constitutes the biggest threat ever posed against Putin and his regime (Morgan and Lang, 2023).

On August 23, the day marking two months since the Wagner troops initiated the mutiny, there are reports of a fatal plane crash in the Tver Region in Central Russia (Insinna and Lampert, 2023). Russian authorities confirm that all ten passengers onboard were killed. Quickly, passenger lists are leaked, detailing the names of the ten people that had been onboard the crashed plane. Among them: Yevgeny Prigozhin and his closest men (The Associated Press, 2023h)

Yevgeny Prigozhin had, prior to his death, made himself known to the world as the man who publicly challenged Vladimir Putin and somehow remained unpunished. In accordance with the Greek myth of Icarus and the Sun, challengers of authoritarian leaders, tend to experience a fall from grace similar to Icarus. For two months exactly, regular people and experts alike had therefore been pondering the Kremlin’s uncharacteristically meek response to the humiliating events caused by Prigozhin in June. Icarus surely wouldn’t have been able to fly that close to the sun for such an extensive time without his wings melting, so why would Prigozhin? Thus, when Prigozhin tumbled from the sky in a fashion unmistakably similar to how Icarus met his fate, few were surprised.

## 1.1 Background

Upon learning about the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, multiple experts and commentators recognized parallels between his case and earlier examples of suspected state-ordered killings of oppositional individuals in Russia. Joakim Paasikivi, lieutenant colonel and experienced

Russia analyst, notes that:” This fits very well with the pattern of undesirable individuals suffering tragic accidents”<sup>1</sup> (Sseruwagi, 2023).

Kjell Engelbrekt, professor of political science at the Swedish Defence University, reasons along the same lines, stating:

Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that this was an accident. However, dozens of people have died in various strange circumstances, and this crash follows the same pattern. It occurs in a way where human intervention is not immediately obvious, which allows the Kremlin leadership to deny its involvement.<sup>2</sup> (TT, 2023)

Gioe, Goodman and Frey (2019) theorize that Putin, since rising to power in 2000, has reinvented the concept of political assassination and made it into a tool for large-scale communication and retaliation by implementing theatrical elements. The authors note that the assassination plots exhibit strategic use of symbolism and attention to optics, similar to how a theater would be designed to capture the audience, leading them to conclude that the main purpose of the new approach – *theatrical vengeance* – is the conveyal of credible and salient messages to relevant audiences (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 569-570). The theoretical concept proposed by the authors will, for the purpose of this study, henceforth be referred to as *theatrical vengeance operations* or simply *theatrical vengeance*. Any referrals to the theoretical framework or concept will be *italicized*.

## 1.2 Research aim

*Theatrical vengeance* has so far only been explicitly linked to assassination plots targeting intelligence defectors. Thus, the full scope of *theatrical vengeance* as a theoretical framework has not been established. The Russian theatrical approach to vengeance may thus adopt variations that have yet to be uncovered. This study acknowledges the widespread associations between Prigozhin’s demise and the long list of Russian dissidents that have previously suffered various unexpected causes of death. It also recognizes the knowledge gap in regard to *theatrical vengeance* and how it may present, and the need for additional research in order to further advance the understanding of the concept. As such, the study will adhere to

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<sup>1</sup> Original quote in Swedish: ”Det här passar väldigt bra in i mönstret att misshagliga drabbas av tragiska olyckor”. Translation from Swedish to English has been performed by the author of the present study.

<sup>2</sup> Original quote in Swedish: ”Vi kan så klart inte utesluta att det här var en olycka. Men dussintals personer har avlidit under olika märkliga omständigheter, och den här kraschen följer samma mönster. Den sker på ett sätt där det inte är direkt uppenbart att det finns en mänsklig hand bakom, och gör att Kreml-ledningen har möjlighet att förneka att den varit inblandad”. Translation from Swedish to English has been performed by the author of the present study.

the unspoken suspicion that Prigozhin's fatal plane crash was in fact no accident at all, but the result of an operation ordered by the Russian state. Thus, Yevgeny Prigozhin's final months alive, as well as dramatic death (henceforth referred to as "the Prigozhin case"), may possibly provide insights of value for the understanding of *theatrical vengeance*.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the refinement of *theatrical vengeance* by evaluating its usefulness as an explanatory framework in relation to the highly publicized Prigozhin case. The aim will be accommodated by 1) outlining the core characteristics of *theatrical vengeance* and translate them into a set of concrete expectations and 2) evaluate whether - and to what extent - those expectations applicable to observations from the Prigozhin case.

### 1.3 Delimitations

The research problem and its implications are highly complex matters and way too intricate to treat in full within the scope of a bachelor's thesis. It is thus important to address the delimitations of the present study by stressing that the research objective is best described in terms of a plausibility probe. Hence, the research does not aspire to produce neither generalizable results nor proof or disproof of the theory on *theatrical vengeance* altogether, but rather to assess whether its scope extends beyond the conditions of the cases through which it was developed. Furthermore, one has to be aware of that certain assumptions have been made about the circumstances of the Prigozhin case, the most important of which is the assumption that Prigozhin's fatal plane crash was indeed not an accident but a murder. The assumptions are necessary for the purpose of the study as factual and independently verifiable accounts of the circumstances are unlikely to ever be disclosed by Russian authorities.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 *Theatrical vengeance*

Gioe et al.'s (2019) conceptual framework outlines a distinct theatrical variation of political assassinations that has emerged during the Putin era. These so-called *theatrical vengeance* operations are designed mainly for communicative purposes, using their theatrical elements to ensure widespread attention. The bold and widely publicized operations allow the Kremlin to demonstrate its capacity and reach, while simultaneously transmitting a salient signal of deterrence by symbolically avenge treacherous acts and betrayals.

#### 2.1.1 Defining *theatrical vengeance*

*Theatrical vengeance operations* are differentiated from other politically motivated operations by their use of symbolism and theatricals to achieve a strong messaging effect (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 561-562). They appear to exclusively target “traitors” and be used as propagandistic tools to demonstrate state power and resolve, serving simultaneously as a public act of revenge and a signal of deterrence (Gioe et al, 2019; Hänni and Grossmann, 2020, p. 410-411). The combination of “self-denouncing modus”, and the exclusive targeting of known “traitors” to Russia, gives *theatrical vengeance operations* a distinct signature that makes the political signal abundantly clear (Hänni and Grossmann, 2020, p. 407).

The typical choice of weapon in *theatrical vengeance operations* is described by Gioe et al. as discreet yet laced with strategic messaging (2019, p. 565). The weapon typically has a symbolic dimension, which would explain the repeated use of nerve agents as “the graphic evidence of [the poison’s] gruesome effects would amplify the strategic messaging” (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 565). The usage of nerve agents such as Novichok also indicates a desire to, in a deniable manner, claim responsibility of the act. Novichok, for instance, warrants associations to Russia, consequently alluding to the political motives and retaliatory purposes of the attack (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 565-566). The operations are characterized by spectacular methods ensuring that the victim *either* dies or suffers “demonstrable or disabling effects” of the vengeance (Gioe et al, 2019, p. 565).

Gioe et al. (2019) recognize that the use of theatricals and symbolism characterizing a *theatrical vengeance operation* may differ between cases. In their article, they highlight



several cases exhibiting characteristics expected in a *theatrical vengeance operation*. In addition to the Novichok poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal and the Polonium-210 poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, upon which many of the theoretical implications have been derived, they mention the murders of Anna Politkovskaja and Boris Nemtsov. Both assassinations exhibit signs of deliberate symbolism, suggesting that political theater may be a shared motivating factor between them. The shooting of journalist Anna Politkovskaja, who was an outspoken critic, that occurred on Putin's birthday in 2006 was widely interpreted a symbolic "birthday present" to the President. In a similar vein, the murder of political opponent Boris Nemtsov by six bullets in his back, was coincidentally carried out on a bridge in Moscow, visible from the Kremlin (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 561-562, 565).

The dramatic approach of *theatrical vengeance operations* extends further than merely the attack itself. Gioe et al., (2019, p. 567-568) highlight several ways in which information warfare is an important element to creating the desired signaling effect. Perhaps the most obvious example of this would be the use of state-controlled media to disseminate multiple accounts about the course of events, which was seen in both the Litvinenko and Skripal cases. The purpose of launching these disinformation campaigns is to direct the narrative and skew the audience's understanding of what happened, which inevitably induces uncertainty and creates ambiguity. Hänni and Grossmann (2020, p. 407) posit that *theatrical vengeance operations* are notoriously coupled with a "grotesquely public" post-operative behavior on behalf of state representatives and the alleged perpetrators. They assert, similarly to Gioe et al. (2019), that the operations are routinely coupled with publicly issued denials of Russian sponsorship. Typically, the public denials come across as implausible, if not ridiculous altogether. In addition to vehement denials of responsibility, it is not uncommon for state representatives to also employ other tactics causing ambiguity such as responding to allegations with counter-allegations or introduce alternative theories about possible perpetrators and explanations to the death/attack (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 567).

## 2.2 Previous research

The conceptual theory on *theatrical vengeance operations* presented by Gioe et al. (2019), and further developed by Hänni and Grossmann (2020), constitutes one of many academic attempts to explain the ways in which states may communicate through actions. This section

of the study will briefly account for some additional research that has touched upon similar concepts, both before the publication of *theatrical vengeance* and since.

### 2.2.1 Political theater analogy

Austin Carson (2016) introduced the idea of a mutually beneficial political theater as a means for inter-state communication, drawing upon Erving Goffman's sociological theory on the theatrical element of social interactions (Carson, 2016, p. 105). Specifically, Carson focused on the mechanisms of what he referred to as *limited war*, stating that actors need to cooperate and tacitly collude in order to prevent involuntary escalations of conflicts. Carson utilized the metaphorical theater that Goffman used and argued that there are "front stage" and "backstage" conditions to be aware of in international politics, too. By restricting transgressions and hostility mainly to the "backstage", he argued, states can communicate intent to one another without having to publicly escalate the conflict (Carson, 2016, p. 109).

### 2.2.2 Costly signaling

Most research that has been conducted in the realm of political signaling has, similarly to Carson (2016), been concentrated on strategic inter-state communication. It is important to note that as a result of this, many theories place a large significance on international law in their attempts to explain how and why states choose to employ covert communication. In this context, it's important to note the difference between *overt* and *covert* communication. Overt communication would be what Carson refers to as the "front stage" activity, where behaviors are adjusted to the public setting. Conversely, covert communication would be more comparable to the "backstage" activity, meaning that it is aimed at conveying messages that, had they been explicitly declared, would cause significant risks of escalation or backlash. A joint study published by Carson and Yarhi-Milo (2016, p. 126) defined *covert communication* in terms of its strategic efforts to ensure that the message is transmitted intelligibly and credibly to the intended receiver, despite not being expressed in explicit terms. The term *covert action* refers to state-funded attempts to, secretly or without acknowledgement, exercise policy action on foreign territory (Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 2016, p. 125). They conclude that blatant transgressions involve considerable risks, causing a sunk cost effect that makes recipients more likely to perceive the political message as credible (Carson & Yarhi-Milo 2016, p. 154).

The importance of implicit costs was also touched upon by Hollyer and Rosendorff (2011) in their study of authoritarian leaders' domestic communication. Specifically, they focused the phenomenon of authoritarian states that sign the United Nations Convention Against Torture (CAT). Hollyer and Rosendorff (2011, p. 315-316) wanted to see what effects the public endorsement of the CAT had on the subsequent prevalence and severity of torture in the autocracies concerned. Their results indicated that autocracies prone to use torture for repressive purposes were actually more likely to also sign the CAT. However, the subsequent reduction of torturous practices was only minor. The authors interpret the results as an indication that autocratic states seem to sign the CAT *because* they already use torture and intend to continue doing so. The official endorsement of the CAT serves to implicitly raise the risks associated with using torture, thereby intensifying the signaling effect of continued appliance of the practice (Hollyer and Rosendorff 2011, p. 315).

Keremoğlu, Hellmeier and Weidmann (2021) developed the understanding of domestic communication through the implementation of repressive policy, observing that autocratic regimes were more inclined to violently repress perceived threats than leaders of other political systems (Keremoğlu et al., 2021, p. 136). If an autocratic regime was heavily person-centered, legitimizing the rule mainly through the leader himself, it was especially prone to employ violent repressive measures against challenges of authority (Keremoğlu et al., 2021, p. 150).

### 2.2.3 Deniability

Cormac and Aldridge (2018) posit that the tendency to evaluate the success of covert action by the degree of secrecy is both simplistic and outdated, as contemporary covert action rarely remains *truly* covert. Furthermore, the emphasis on secrecy also fails to recognize the communicative possibilities of covert action that have emerged along with technological advancements (Cormac and Aldridge, 2018, p. 478-479, 487). Cormac and Aldridge therefore introduce the term *implausible deniability* as an alternative to the traditional *plausible deniability*. Their theory emphasizes the strategic signaling effect derived from covert action when combined with a public denial of involvement despite obvious culpability. While still serving an important role in preventing escalations and complicating prosecution under international law, the authors suggested that an intentionally self-denouncing transgression generates a situation in which the subsequent denial alone constitutes a highly salient signal (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018, p. 491). They mention Russia as an actor that has particularly

embraced *implausible deniability* and started to employ it routinely in their operations. By disingenuously rejecting accusations, while simultaneously using information warfare to disseminate disinformation, they strive to achieve ambiguity (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018, p. 489-492).

#### 2.2.4 The Russian “Politics of Fear”

In the domestic perspective, the Russian approach to political signaling is often referred to as the “politics of fear”. The “politics of fear” is essentially a communicative practice in which the regime aims to instill fear in order to maintain political control. Among the methods employed for this purpose is the use of “overt intimidation and public discrediting of the regime’s critics, and selective persecution and open harassment of opposition activists and/or supporters” (Gel’man 2016, p. 27). Rogov (2018) refines the understanding of mechanisms of “politics of fear” further by detailing different types of repressive techniques employed. He argues that Russian political repression can be broadly categorized under three types of targets; activities, people or organizations.

- Activity-centric repression is directed at certain activities, and the victims of such repression are often randomly selected participants in the targeted activity. The activities in question are rarely formally prohibited, however the prosecutions against arbitrarily chosen participants are intended to demonstrate the risks associated with exercising your “right” to participate (Rogov, 2018, p. 157-158).
- Person-centric repression aims to intimidate and undermine the opposition by prosecuting its members. The goal is to demonstrate the dangers of activism, although the victims are rarely explicitly accused of crimes associated with their political activism. For example, these individuals are often charged with economic crimes (Rogov, 2018, p. 158).
- Organization-centric repression targets, as the name suggests, undesirable organizations and their work. Oftentimes, this is done by the use of repressive legislation that undermines their ability to obtain funding or operate independently (Rogov, 2018, p. 156).

Rogov additionally states that the prosecution generally assumes one of three formats; administrative, criminal and informal.

- Administrative prosecution refers to the implementation of restrictive legislation, mainly rendering short term arrests or punitive fines (Rogov, 2018, p. 157).
- Criminal prosecution refers to the use of the Criminal Code (CC) to accuse and convict targets of criminal offenses that result in more severe penalties such as long prison terms (Rogov, 2018, p. 157).
- Informal prosecution can be carried out by either state-affiliated actors such as the law-enforcement, or by non-state actors that are informally endorsed by the state (2018, p. 157). Types of informal repressive techniques include police brutality, torture, aggressive assaults and murder, strongly conveying the high risks associated with partaking or instigating undesirable activities (Rogov, 2018, p. 157).

## 3 Methodology

The purpose of this section is to account briefly for the methodological considerations made in order to accommodate the research aim.

The study is best understood as a plausibility probe into *theatrical vengeance*. Buttolph Johnson, Reynolds and Mycoff (2020) define four categories of case studies, distinguished by research purpose. A plausibility probe is defined as a case study with the purpose “to sharpen a hypothesis or theory, to refine the operationalization or measurement of key variables, or to explore the suitability of a particular case as a vehicle for testing a theory before engaging in a costly and time-consuming research effort” (Buttolph Johnson, Reynolds and Mycoff, 2020, p. 138). Similarly, this study does not aspire to produce neither generalizable results nor proof or disproof of *theatrical vengeance*, but to assess its scope conditions and relevance to a particular and contemporary case.

### 3.1 Research method

The aim of the research is pursued through a qualitative analysis of a single case, i.e the Prigozhin case. The research method adopts a qualitative approach in a way that closely resembles congruence analysis, using the set of expectations derived from the theoretical framework to evaluate if, and to what extent, *theatrical vengeance* is an applicable explanatory model. The Prigozhin case was selected mainly due to its most-likely properties, which were noticed due to the immediate and wide-spread tendency to compare the case to other highly publicized cases with similar features. However, it was also recognized as a highly unusual case in the sense that the chain of events leading up to his death were covered thoroughly by news media, causing a substantial access to information about developments.

The method is heavily inspired by, but not completely equivalent to, the congruence analysis as presented by Blatter and Haverland (2012). Whereas a congruence analysis is typically used to compare and contrast two or more theories, this study will only include the theory on *theatrical vengeance* (Blatter and Haverland, 2012, p.144). The analysis will be concluded by a summarizing evaluation of if Yevgeny Prigozhin’s demise can plausibly be understood through the theoretical lens of *theatrical vengeance* and to what extent the framework is suitable for analysing the case. Part of the evaluation will assume a theory refining approach, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of its predictive power in relation to the case and

reflecting upon possible areas of refinement that emerge throughout the analysis (Blatter and Haverland, 2012, p. 144). Despite the singular-theory format, the analytic procedure of a congruence analysis will in large be adhered to.

One of the main strengths of the congruence analysis, is its flexibility and that it consequently can be applied also when the supply of information is somewhat inadequate (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 227). Instead of focusing on facts, the analysis rather concerns itself with observable events, which do not necessarily need to be fully complete in their reflection of the events in question. This approach is feasible since the congruence analysis normally doesn't aim at drawing conclusions about the case at hand, but rather about the explanatory power of the theory used to study the case (Blatter and Haverland, 2012, p. 144-145). Since the purpose of the congruence analysis is to evaluate the explanatory power of theory, unsolved - or somewhat unclear – events may also be used. Covert actions are often characterized by unsolved – or unclear – events and the researcher has to adapt by applying the best possible method given the circumstances.

### 3.2 Case study

Case studies are extremely useful in relation to theory development since the concept validity is high (George and Bennet, 2005, p. 40). Single-case (small-N) research typically achieves a higher concept validity relative to large-N studies (Blatter and Haverland, 2012, p. 64).

A single-case study is a fitting research approach when striving for in-depth understanding of a single or limited number of cases. It allows the researcher to capture nuances which would have gone by unnoticed if the analysis was made on a larger sample. The timeline is also of importance – over time behaviour/reactions/performance etc is easier to understand and research when the population in question is limited to one – or few – cases. The main disadvantages of a single case study are that the result might not be relevant in a generic sense, one cannot assume that the observations are applicable in a broader perspective. Also, there is a higher risk for bias as the researcher normally has been personally involved in all steps of the design and carrying through of the research consequently introducing possibilities to influencing the result.

The Prigozhin case, as understood for the purpose of this study, comprises a series of events that occurred roughly between February 2023 and October 2023, peaking between end of June and end of August. In broad terms, the Prigozhin case refers to the final months of

Yevgeny Prigozhin's life, including the armed rebellion he initiated and his notable death exactly two months post-mutiny, as well as the aftermath of the two. An elaborate case description will be provided in the first section of the analysis chapter, and it constitutes a basis for the understanding of the case and the following analysis.

### 3.3 Material

As the information flow in Russia is restricted, Western news media's access to credible sources of information are limited too. The result of this is that media outlet often share their sources. Major news agencies such as Reuters and AP are able to publish somewhat reliable information, and smaller or local agencies refer back to them when reporting Russian news. Thus, the information/observations used in the analysis will be exclusively retrieved from Reuters and AP, using the keywords "Wagner" and "Prigozhin" to locate the relevant articles on their respective websites. Wherever possible, the official statements referenced in articles published by Reuters or AP have been retrieved from their primary sources, for example the official transcripts of Putin's remarks published on the President of Russia website. The material was then read and processed with the research aim in mind to narrow the observations down an amount suitable for the scope of this study. The observations were presented in chronological order to visualize the development over time.

This methodical approach to data collection, limiting both sources and keywords, reduces the likelihood that bias, misinformation or disinformation will influence the analysis, and also sets a certain standard to what journalistic material is included. Though objectivity, factuality or adequacy are never given in the context of reporting about the domestic matters of a sovereign authoritarian state, the awareness of it can still serve as a controlling factor.

### 3.4 Operationalization

The applicability of the framework will be assessed by evaluating observations from the case, using a set of predictions derived from the article written by Gioe et al. (2019) on the concept of *theatrical vengeance*. The predictions, or expectations, that will guide the analysis in this study have been formulated to capture the essence of what Gioe, Goodman and Frey (2019) describe as a *theatrical vengeance operation*. The ideas presented by Hänni and Grossmann (2020) in an attempt to illustrate their interpretation of the original conceptual framework have also been considered during the operationalization process.



If the Prigozhin case can be understood in terms of *theatrical vengeance*, it is expected to exhibit the following characteristics:

1. A spectacular and highly publicized revenge on particularly odious crime or treason
2. Use of symbolism and theatricals to convey salient message of deterrence
3. Self-denouncing yet plausibly deniable modus
4. Use of information warfare to disseminate disinformation and conspiracy theories

## 4 Analysis

The aim of the analysis is to provide an evaluation of the Prigozhin case through the theoretical lens of *theatrical vengeance*, assessing to what extent the framework contributes to the understanding of the case. This will be achieved by assessing whether and to what extent observations from the case align with the predictions that have been derived from *theatrical vengeance*, which are specified in chapter 3.4 *Operationalization*.

The first section consists of a case description detailing key developments. The case description is, in addition to acting as a base for the subsequent analysis, intended to provide the reader with an understanding of the chronology. The events will not necessarily be treated in chronological order within the analysis, as the analysis section is instead structured by the predictions against which the case is evaluated. Each prediction will be followed by a closer examination of relevant observations from the case as seen fit for the analysis.

### 4.1 Case description

#### 4.1.1 Start of conflict

Yevgeny Prigozhin's critical campaign directed at the Russian military leadership starts to gain significant traction during the spring of 2023. Using his affiliated social media channels, Prigozhin posts voice recordings, videos and written statements over the course of several months condemning the poor management of Russian troops in Ukraine.

In May, Prigozhin posts a widely renowned video featuring himself in what is alleged to be a battlefield in Ukraine. Prigozhin addresses the Kremlin directly as he states that the bodies behind him belong to Wagner soldiers that died in battle during the day. He swears profusely and says "The blood is still fresh, they came here as volunteers and they're dying so that you can get fat in your offices." He claims that his troops have a 70% shortage of ammunition and blames Defense Minister Shoigu and Commander Gerasimov directly. He also states that the responsible officials in the Kremlin will go to hell (Reuters, 2023h).

#### 4.1.2 The armed mutiny

The mutiny begins on June 23<sup>rd</sup> when Prigozhin, allegedly backed by 25 000 Wagner soldiers, crosses the border into Russia and starts toward Moscow (Liffey, 2023b; Osborn and Liffey, 2023). The FSB (security service) responds by charging him with “calling for an armed rebellion”, an offense punishable by a 20-year prison term and urges Wagner soldiers to immediately arrest Prigozhin (The Associated Press, 2023g; Liffey, 2023a). The Wagner soldiers advance quickly, their progress continuously reflected by Prigozhin’s own updates on social media platform Telegram. By the next day, the mutineers claim to have seized Russian city Rostov-on-Don, as well as an important military facility located there (The Associated Press, 2023g). President Putin publicly addresses the mutiny in a televised speech on the morning of June 24<sup>th</sup>, stating that the mutineers have “betrayed” the Fatherland and claims that the rebellion is motivated by personal interests of its instigators and a subsequent allegiance with external enemies (The Associated Press, 2023a; Putin, 2023a). He also vows to punish the responsible parties thoroughly (The Associated Press, 2023e). Prigozhin responds that "Nobody is going to turn themselves in and confess at the order of the President, the FSB or anyone else. Because we don't want the country to continue to live any longer in corruption, deceit and bureaucracy" (Reuters, 2023c).

Merely a couple hours after posting the audio recording, however, Prigozhin suddenly announces that a deal has been struck between him and Moscow and subsequently orders a drawback of the Wagner troops. Initial information indicates that Prigozhin has agreed to de-escalate in exchange for dropped criminal charges against him as well as safe passage to Belarus (Faulconbridge, 2023a; Osborn, 2023c). The amnesty is publicly confirmed by Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov (Kirka and Merchant, 2023) as well as lawmaker Pavel Krasheninnikov (Reuters, 2023f). The withdrawal of Wagner troops post-mutiny transpires undramatically, and both parties initially seem to honor the agreed upon conditions.

#### 4.1.3 Developments post-mutiny

Immediately post-mutiny, Prigozhin falls mostly silent, and the Kremlin administration appears to continue business as usual. People are unsure as to what will unfold, but analysts note that the meek response to such a monumental act of political opposition is highly uncharacteristic for Putin’s Russia, asserting that people branded by the term “traitor” are rarely acquitted (Litvinova, 2023d). The future of Prigozhin and the Wagner Group is widely

discussed in Western media. AP News quote CIA director William Burns saying that Putin is “the ultimate apostle of payback”, thus insinuating the unlikeliness that Prigozhin would escape unpunished for his acts indefinitely (The Associated Press, 2023j). Christo Grozev at Bellingcat asserts that “In six months, Prigozhin will either be dead or there will be a second coup. I’m agnostic between the two but I can’t see neither of these happening” (Trevelyan, 2023). It is not unlikely that the decision to assassinate Prigozhin had already been made at this point, seemingly implied by President Lukashenko of Belarus a week post-mutiny in a comment: “...A brutal decision had been made to wipe out the mutineers. I suggested to Putin not to rush”(Osborn, 2023a). When probed further about it, he developed his statement by adding that some members of the Kremlin had been in favor of neutralizing Prigozhin during the mutiny, but that the solution was ultimately dismissed out of fear of triggering a civil war (Faulconbridge, 2023a). Kremlin spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, continues to assert that “the deal ending the mutiny is being implemented, and that Putin always [keeps] his word” (Osborn, 2023b).

Within days of the aborted mutiny, Russian authorities and state-sponsored media embark on a seemingly coordinated smear campaign against Prigozhin starting with a meeting held by Putin on June 26th with Defense Ministry personnel. In his address, the President applauds the efforts made to suppress the rebellion and continues by remarkably confirming, for the first time ever, that the Wagner Group had indeed been fully financed by the Russian state. He declares that the finances of Yevgeny Prigozhin’s catering firm, Concord, will thus be put under investigation, implying that there is reason to suspect embezzlement of tax money: “I do hope that no one stole anything in the process or, at least, did not steal a lot. It goes without saying that we will look into all of this” (Reuters, 2023j; Putin, 2023c).

Prigozhin, whose whereabouts are still unknown at this point, breaks the silence briefly by releasing an audio message to his regular Telegram platform. Among other things, he says that the Wagner march was a “master class” and suggests that Russian troops may have had more success in Ukraine had they carried out the invasion on February 24<sup>th</sup> in a similar manner (The Associated Press, 2023f). Whereas Prigozhin falls back into silence after this, the coordinated smear-campaign intensifies.

On July 5th, state-sponsored TV-channel Russia-1 airs an episode of the show “60 minutes”, in which the smear campaign is further escalated. In the timeframe between the aborted

mutiny and the TV broadcast, all media outlets affiliated with Prigozhin were inexplicably shut down (Reuters, 2023d). The recent close-downs are addressed in the following comment: "I consider that the creation of Yevgeny Prigozhin's image as a people's hero was all done by media fed by Yevgeny Prigozhin," the host commented, referring to media outlets being financed by Prigozhin, continuing: "after it failed, they quickly closed and fled" (Osborn, 2023c).

The host repeatedly refers to Prigozhin as a "traitor" throughout the episode. Additionally, the audience is continuously reminded of his criminal past as images, allegedly taken during a police raid conducted on 24<sup>th</sup> in Prigozhin's offices and private mansion, are shown. Among the pictures of alleged discoveries from the raid were large quantities of cash, gold bars and weapons as well as multiple fake passports and wigs (Osborn, 2023c; Litvinova, 2023a). While "60 minutes" is broadcasted, photographs of Prigozhin are being leaked to channels on the Telegram messaging app, depicting Prigozhin in different disguises (Osborn, 2023c). A possible objective of the whole ordeal is defined as undermining the credibility of Prigozhin's claims of high-level corruption in the Russian military, which were repeatedly used as a justification of the mutiny (Reuters, 2023c).

#### 4.1.4 Death of Prigozhin

Exactly two months after the initiation of the armed mutiny, on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, reports of a lethal plane crash outside Moscow emerge along with pictures of the fuming wreck. All passengers onboard the downed private jet are presumed dead, which is quickly confirmed by authorities. They later also confirm the accuracy of the flight manifest, which lists Yevgeny Prigozhin's name among the ten, now deceased, passengers. Remarkably, the flight manifest also lists several other high-ranking members of the Wagner Group. The co-travel was labeled by AP as an "extraordinary breach of security" (The Associated Press, 2023h).

#### 4.1.5 Aftermath

The dramatic death of Yevgeny Prigozhin and his closest men generates immediate reactions abroad. US President Joe Biden expresses that while he doesn't know for a fact what happened to Prigozhin, he's not surprised by the news of his alleged death. Biden refers back to an interview he gave a couple of weeks prior to the crash, in which he had jokingly advised Prigozhin to be careful as to what he ate or rode in. Upon being asked about the possibility

that President Putin is responsible for the lethal crash, he answers “There’s not much that happens in Russia that Putin is not behind” (Biden, 2023).

Putin addresses the plane crash in a televised address on August 24<sup>th</sup>, confirming that preliminary reports indicate that members of the Wagner group were indeed traveling onboard the downed plane. He then continues: “I had known Prigozhin for a very long time, since the start of the 90s. He was a man with a difficult fate, and he made serious mistakes in life” (Osborn, 2023d).

In addition to Putin’s televised address, the Kremlin proceeds to respond officially to allegations of a state-ordered assassination. The day after Putin’s address, on Friday 25<sup>th</sup>, spokesperson Dmitry Peskov publicly dismisses the allegations, deeming them products of a Western political agenda. He notes that “Of course, in the West those speculations are put out under a certain angle, and all of it is a complete lie” (The Associated Press, 2023d). Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov adds that the initial comment on the crash by President Biden, in which he insinuates that Putin is likely involved somehow, indicates an American lack of respect for diplomatic relations (Reuters, 2023e).

State representatives announce that the Russian Investigative Committee has been assigned the task of probing into the circumstances surrounding the fatal incident, and that international assistance will be declined. Spokesperson Peskov tells reporters that the Russian investigators consider multiple causes of the crash including “let’s put it this way, deliberate wrongdoing” (AP News, 2023a). According to analyst Keir Giles, the prospect of a reliable and/or transparent investigation is to be considered improbable. The reason, he argues, is that the plane crash is way too “politically significant” (The Associated Press, 2023k). Reuters, however, deems Peskov’s statement as “the first explicit acknowledgement that [Prigozhin] may have been assassinated” (Reuters, 2023b).

The information available about the crash beyond these statements is limited, as the Kremlin seemingly intentionally downplays the importance of Prigozhin’s death and Russian media outlets barely cover the story at all. Analysts believe that the silence is a product of a dilemma the Kremlin likely face in how to address the event. Prigozhin had, for instance, received public praise by state representatives for his contributions to Russian successes in Ukraine, making it more difficult to dismiss him as insignificant altogether. However, the

extensive campaign that targeted Prigozhin prior to the murder had effectively dismantled his business empire and severely discredited him, perhaps to diminish his chances of an honorable legacy. His funeral was performed in quiet, later described by Tatiana Stanyvaya at Carnegie Russia Euroasia Center as “the final stage of a special operation to eliminate him” (AP News, 2023b). Putin did not attend the service, which was not unexpected as spokesperson Peskov had previously responded to questions about the President’s attendance by noting that he has a “busy schedule”, implying that other things were more important to him than attending the mercenary’s funeral (Jones, 2023).

The next time Yevgeny Prigozhin is mentioned is during an interview with President Putin. Putin asserts that the results of the investigation into the fatal plane crash have concluded that the plane was not exposed to external impact prior to crashing. He does however reveal that fragments of hand grenades had been retrieved from the bodies of the passengers. He says that the investigators had regrettably not conducted the necessary analyses to determine if any passengers had been intoxicated by the time of death, thereby reinforcing the narrative that had been established about Prigozhin one final time: “Yes, unfortunately, no examination was carried out on the presence of alcohol or drugs in the victims’ blood, although we know that after the well-known events, the FSB discovered not only 10 billion [rubles] in cash, but also five kilograms of cocaine at the St Petersburg office of the company [Wagner].” (Putin, 2023d)

## 4.2 Applying *theatrical vengeance*

As stated, the study aims to contribute to the refinement of *theatrical vengeance* by evaluating its usefulness as an explanatory framework in relation to the Prigozhin case. The analysis will be entirely based upon the observations accounted for in the previous section (4.1 Case description). However, it is important to note that the overview of the case only touched upon each event briefly. For the purpose of the analysis, certain observations may therefore be elaborated further as seen fit.

### 4.2.1 Spectacular and highly publicized revenge on particularly odious crime or treason

The first thing that needs to be established is whether the Russian regime would be inclined to order a *theatrical vengeance operation* targeted at Yevgeny Prigozhin or not. *Theatrical vengeance operations* appear to be reserved for individuals that have committed particularly

abhorrent acts of treason against Russia. Notably, several recorded cases of *theatrical vengeance* thus far can be linked to actions deliberately undermining the respect for the Russian intelligence- or security apparatus. Arguably, betrayals of this kind are perceived by Putin as personally offensive due to his KGB background (Gioe et al., 2019, p. 561-562, 571).

One only needs to look as far as to the public address made by President Putin during the mutiny to conclude that the mutiny organized by Prigozhin was indeed viewed as “particularly odious” by the Kremlin:

What we are facing is essentially a betrayal. Inflated ambitions and personal interests have led to treason – treason against our country, our people and the common cause/.../ any internal revolt is a deadly threat to our statehood and our nation. It is a blow to Russia, to our people. (Putin, 2023a)

Although Prigozhin’s name is not explicitly mentioned, the Kremlin was certainly aware of his role in staging the mutiny. One must also remember that Prigozhin’s betrayal didn’t start, or even end, with the armed mutiny. As has been detailed above, he repeatedly and publicly ignored repressive legislation related to the war in Ukraine long before the mutiny was a fact. He severely undermined the authority of both the regime and the Russian military by openly criticizing how the war was being conducted and accusing the higher-ups of incompetence, corruption and arrogance. After the deal had been struck to end the armed mutiny, he went back online boasting about the successful advancement of his troops into Russia. He even went as far as to suggest that “[the mutineers] showed a master class, as it should have been on Feb. 24, 2022,” thereby adding insult to injury (Reuters, 2023l).

The Kremlin authority was further eroded as news broke regarding the contents of the deal that was agreed upon between the regime and the mutineers. It appeared as though substantial concessions were made on Kremlin’s behalf as Prigozhin agreed to abort the mutiny in exchange for dropped criminal charges and a free passage to exile in Belarus. The impression was further amplified by the absence of the “harsh punishment” that Putin had explicitly assured in his address to the citizens of Russia during the mutiny (Putin, 2023a). AP News quote political analyst and former speech writer at the Kremlin, Abbas Gallyamov, who argues that Prigozhin might as well have shoved Putin’s face in dirt in front of the world, referring to the humiliation caused by the way in which the situation unfolded (Burrows and Madhani, 2023).



However, if one instead hypothesizes that the motivation of *theatrical vengeance operations* lies primarily with the perceived betrayal of the President's personal confidence and values, the Prigozhin case can be viewed in a different light. There are several reasons why Prigozhin's acts would personally offend Putin, not least the fact that much of Prigozhin's power, wealth and influence is the result of the close and long-standing relationship between him and Putin. In his televised address, Putin repeatedly referred to an "internal revolt", "internal betrayal" and "subversion from within" (Putin, 2023a). He also explicitly called the mutiny a "stab in the back" (Putin, 2023a). Additionally, he seemingly took a personal dig at Prigozhin by saying that the people responsible for the mutiny were driven by "inflated ambitions and personal interests" (Putin, 2023a). The narrative about Prigozhin's poor character would stick and later become a recurring theme in content produced by state-sponsored media (Litvinova, 2023a). Both the personal insult and the use of the term "stab in the back" could in this context be interpreted as signs of Putin being affected by the betrayal on a deeper and more personal level.

#### 4.2.2 Use of symbolism and theatricals to convey salient message of deterrence

The spectacular cause of death by the downing of a plane would be in line with expectations on a *theatrical vengeance operation*. Not only did it distinguish the Kremlin from "common thugs" but demonstrated Putin's power to determine life or death. It was argued that choosing a plane crash as the means of putting Prigozhin's life to an end made the message not to oppose the Kremlin stronger than if Prigozhin had died quietly from poisoning. Vladimir Pastukhov, a political analyst, claims that there is a deep, symbolic meaning by executing Prigozhin in a plane crash. During the mutiny, the main casualties on the Russian side were pilots, shot down by Wagner's air defense. What could be a better way of demonstrating power and control than demonstratively killing Prigozhin himself in a plane crash? (Faulconbridge and Osborn, 2023). Ultimately the pictures of the wrecked plane, still fuming from the accident, represents the non-questionable victory and regained image of Putin being the tough and decisive leader he was considered to be before he seemingly let Prigozhin walk away from the mutiny unpunished. Furthermore, it subtly ties Prigozhin's own death to the acts that he is likely being punished for.

The article introducing *theatrical vengeance* places a large significance in physical pain and suffering in regard to symbolism, possibly due to the nature of the cases that were used to formulate and illustrate the patterns of *theatrical vengeance operations*. In this aspect, the Prigozhin case deviates considerably from what is to be expected according to the framework, as there was no element of public physical torture or suffering to be seen. However, Gioe et al. (2019) never explicitly claim that the suffering *has* to be physical, but rather emphasize the importance of conveying an intelligible warning through the use of symbolism. Again, the purpose of a theatrical approach to vengeance is primarily to create a dramatic development that garners as much attention as possible, thus making the message visible to a large audience. One could argue that Prigozhin was put through significant public torture that would ultimately leave him marked by the revenge of his treason, but that neither the torture nor the marks were of physical character, but instead psychological. Considering the personal relationship between Prigozhin and Putin that mainly revolved around business connections and mutual strengthening of one another's influence and power, the "acts of torture and suffering" may have been tailored to what would be considered most painful or humiliating to Prigozhin. Forcing Prigozhin to watch his own smear campaign unfold as his business empire and legacy were being dismantled and tainted could therefore be perceived as a form of symbolic torture or punishment.

Although the manner in which Yevgeny Prigozhin died was undeniably symbolic, one could argue that the case exhibits signs of being more extensive than that. One might react to the seemingly skewed distribution of observations throughout the months leading up to the plane crash. The Prigozhin case features a theatrical dramaturgical buildup and construction of narrative that arguably differs from what has been observed before. A possible explanation is that the Prigozhin case lacks the international aspect, likely motivating excessive theatricals comprised within the actual assassination plots of Skripal and Litvinenko. Not risking international retaliation, one could speculate that the *theatrical vengeance operation* targeting Prigozhin was afforded an extended time period to develop in a way that hadn't been possible before. Analysing the case, the murder itself is certainly an important theatrical feature, but unlike the Skripal or Litvinenko cases, not the only significant event in terms of signaling. This is not to say that the plane crash was wholly insignificant to the signaling effect of the operation, because it wasn't, but that the portrayal of Prigozhin during his final months may have been just as important a message as the way in which he met his end. Again, there is reason to suspect that the choice of theatrical elements may be adapted to the nature of the

treason that is being avenged as well as the individual that is being targeted. In Prigozhin's case, it makes sense that the main focus would be on deteriorating his legacy, and to not allow him to retain a martyr status by killing him in slow fashion.

#### 4.2.3 Self-denouncing yet plausibly deniable modus

To this day, there is no conclusive proof that the plane crash was anything else but an accident. Although there is ample reason to suspect foul play, the Russian regime has maintained their innocence, thus invoking plausible deniability. However, looking back at the circumstances preceding and succeeding his death, the public denials appear to be implausible or cosmetic at best.

Firstly, the plane crash occurred exactly two months post-mutiny, a fact that gained immediate attention and made massive headlines. The perfect timing was interpreted as a subtle confirmation that the plane crash wasn't actually an accident, though it was hardly likely in the first place either. The odds that Yevgeny Prigozhin's private jet would malfunction at all are slim, that it would do so exactly two months after he committed the worst case of treason ever witnessed by the Kremlin are close to zero. Adding that it malfunctioned so timely, while Prigozhin and several other high-ranking members of the Wagner Group were travelling together is pretty much impossible altogether.

Again, the fact that the murder was conducted on Russian territory was likely tactical in the sense that the Kremlin could be in total control of the subsequent investigation into what happened, and how the results of it would be conveyed. This might be interpreted as a self-denouncing element by itself, as Russian authorities refused to accept international assistance and wouldn't probe into the causes of the crash in accordance with international praxis.

Another possible element of self-denouncing yet plausibly deniable behavior would be the "eulogy" that President Putin held in response to Prigozhin's death, in which he spoke about the mercenary in past tense. However, in the same address he emphasized that the genetic testing of the bodies had not been concluded, possibly hint about the orchestration of the crash. Why would he publicly insinuate that he "knew" that the mercenary had been killed before initial tests had even been conducted?

#### 4.2.4 Use of information warfare to disseminate disinformation and conspiracy theories

Regarding this prediction, it's mainly relevant to expand on the aftermath of the plane crash as the use of information warfare prior to the murder has already been established in treating the other predictions. It is worth noting however, that the use of information warfare described by Gioe et al. (2019) is mainly of a chaotic character, aiming to cause ambiguity by spreading different versions and theories about the event. The information warfare seen in this case, notably the smear-campaign directed at Prigozhin prior to his murder, conversely gave the impression of being rather calculated and consistent, sticking to and reinforcing one overarching narrative. The campaign certainly made use of ambiguity too, but seemingly in a less "random" fashion than seen before. One example is when Putin spoke about the fact that no testing for alcohol or drugs had been conducted on the bodies in connection to the crash. Although the suggestive comment was arguably a "conspiracy theory" or "alternative version of the event", his subsequent referral to the findings of cocaine that had allegedly been found during the police raid of Prigozhin's mansion meant that also these claims aligned neatly with the overarching narrative.

*Theatrical vengeance operations* additionally tend to include elements of insincere efforts to promote a thorough investigation of the event and the importance of the rule of law, which is also illustrated clearly by the approach to the investigation of the crash, accounted for under the previous expectation. According to Gioe et al. (2019), the public communication adds yet another theatrical dimension to the operation, as the endorsements of transparency and the rule of law are often coupled with actions that deliberately and visibly undermine both concepts. Likely, the objective is to mock the Western legal practices and simultaneously demonstrate the impunity enjoyed by the Kremlin's proxies.

### 4.3 Summary and implications

In summary, this study has sought to refine the theory on *theatrical vengeance* by assessing its applicability and relevance to the understanding of the Prigozhin case. The theoretical framework was operationalized through a set of comprehensive expectations reflecting the core characteristics of a *theatrical vengeance operation*. The predictions were subsequently used to analyse the developments observed in the Prigozhin case to assess to what extent the explanatory framework would contribute to the understanding of it.

The predictions were all applicable and contributed to the overall understanding of the case. The study has however revealed that the divergences between how *theatrical vengeance* presents within the Prigozhin case as compared to the intelligence defector cases previously studied. The differences suggest that theatricals and use of symbolism employed for *theatrical vengeance*- purposes may be adapted to the specific target and context of the operation. An interesting research question for the future would be to analyze another sensational, domestic death affecting an influential person using the same predictions. This would give further knowledge regarding the robustness of the operationalization as presented in this study.

By analyzing the chain of events regarding the Prigozhin case through the lens of *theatrical vengeance*, a theatrical reenactment eerily similar to the mythological demise of Icarus appears. The performance conveys a message, leaving the audience with a reminder that regardless of who you are and what you have achieved, any attempt to fly too close to the sun will result in your wings melting and for you to dramatically fall to the ground for everyone to witness.

## 5 Conclusion

The results of the study show that the observations from the Prigozhin case indeed correspond to the predictions derived from the explanatory framework *theatrical vengeance*. As such, the case appears to constitute a variation of *theatrical vengeance operation* in that it extends over time and conveys the message through a series of events, rather than solely through the murder itself.

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