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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion Putin just gave Belarus an unwanted ‘gift’

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Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko has announced that Yevgeniy Prigozhin, the leader of the attempted mutiny against the Kremlin, has arrived in Belarus. It was Lukashenko who mediated the deal between Prigozhin and Russian President Vladimir Putin that brought an end to the march on Moscow by Wagner Group mercenaries. The agreement included a promise of asylum for the deposed Wagner leader — in Belarus.

I feel compelled to point out that no one ever asked the citizens of Belarus for their opinion on this arrangement. The reality is that Prigozhin’s arrival on our soil fills most of us with dread.

Again, we find ourselves dragged unwillingly into the chaos created by Putin’s imperial ambitions. Again, the agent of our misery is the thief who stole our 2020 presidential election — Lukashenko, the Putin puppet who has turned Belarus into a vassal state of the Kremlin.

Putin’s help, both economic and political, has proved crucial in Lukashenko’s efforts to cling to power. Last year, Lukashenko repaid part of his debt by allowing Russian troops to march through Belarus to Ukraine’s northern border. Their attack on Kyiv in February and March of 2022, which was decisively repelled by the Ukrainians, was launched from Belarusian soil. Lukashenko has since signaled that he would happily provide bases for Russian nuclear weapons. This month, he announced that Belarus has already taken delivery of short-range Russian nuclear warheads.

One thing in this fog of bluff and menace is crystal clear. The people of Belarus did not seek to be part of the war against Ukraine. We never wanted Russian troops in our country, and we certainly don’t want their nuclear weapons. Nor is there any conceivable benefit to Belarusian citizens from allowing Prigozhin and his heavily armed thugs to settle here, apparently indefinitely. (There are already signs that Belarus might be building a new military camp to house Wagner fighters.)

The disquieting Wagner presence introduces a sinister new threat to Belarusian independence — that we will become enmeshed in power struggles beyond our control. Any fighting between rival Russian military factions might now spill into Belarusian territory. We are bordered to the west by Poland and to the north by Latvia and Lithuania, none of which is likely to feel safer with a mercenary army of Russian convicts and war criminals squatting on their doorsteps. We want the lot of them out of our country.

Belarusians risk jail for merely questioning Moscow's conduct of the war. Yet it has not stopped many from actively resisting the Russian war machine and supporting Ukraine with partisan attacks and sabotage. Many Belarusians are also fighting in Ukraine to defend the freedoms we all hold dear.

The events of the past few days have underlined that Belarus is central to Putin's regional strategy. Without Lukashenko, Moscow's options are diminished. And without Putin, Lukashenko cannot hope to survive. I hope Belarusians will feel emboldened to help Ukraine win this war. It has never been clearer that the fates of both our countries are entwined in this war's eventual outcome.

We therefore hope the rest of Europe and the global coalition supporting Ukraine will recognize the strategic value of Belarus and the importance of supporting democratic forces opposed to Lukashenko. (Lukashenko's jails are filled with critics who dared oppose him. Among the political prisoners he has jailed on bogus charges are my husband, Sergei Tikhanovsky, and Ales Bialiatski, a winner of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize. Nearly three years ago, the government in Minsk sent me into exile after I took part in the 2020 presidential election — which I and many others believe I won.)

We cannot let the chaos in Russia spread to its neighbors. It serves nobody's interest in the West to let Lukashenko anywhere near nuclear weapons.

Nor should we turn a blind eye to Lukashenko's abominable human rights record. The West must not pretend that Lukashenko is a legitimate president who might be useful as a conduit to competing Russian interests. He is a criminal who stole power by force and seeks only to save himself.

It's high time to discuss Belarus at next month's NATO Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, just about 20 miles from the Belarusian border. It's high time to raise the issue of Belarus with the U.N. Security Council. Lukashenko's irresponsible leadership is no longer an internal question for Belarus. His erratic decisions now threaten the civilized world. All nations that believe in democracy and the rule of law should immediately impose sanctions on those involved in the deployment of Russian mercenaries and nuclear weapons in Belarus.

Where Prigozhin fits into this ominous equation we can only speculate. It seems he still operates with impunity — despite his incendiary threats against Putin's generals. But his volcanic nature and private army will keep him a threat to us all. So far, my country has managed to stay free of the fighting. But now, Belarus is becoming a new front in Putin's war.