

Enemies turn up heat on 'Putin's chef'

Russia

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It has been a long, strange and violent journey for Yevgeny Prigozhin, one that has taken him from a brutal Soviet prison camp to Russia's corridors of power.

Prigozhin, 61, is head of the Wagner Group, a private military contractor that has deployed thousands of mercenaries to Ukraine, and a vocal supporter of the invasion. His access to President Putin is believed to rival that of the defence and foreign ministers, and this summer he was awarded the Hero of Russia medal, the country's highest honour. He is even said to give orders to military officials.

However, Prigozhin's remarkable rise is thought to have made him enemies in the Kremlin's security services. And it seems they are digging into his sordid past to try to bring him down.

In 1981 Prigozhin was sentenced by a Soviet court to 13 years in prison for aggravated robbery and burglary. In one attack Prigozhin mugged a woman, choking her until she lost consciousness and stealing her boots and gold earrings.

He broke into flats and cars, stealing candles, gloves, jeans and an umbrella, court records show. In addition he was found guilty of involving a young boy in criminal activities and plying him with alcohol. He served nine years of his sentence but was released in 1990, shortly before the Soviet Union fell.

Little is known about his time behind bars, which he spent at a medium-security prison camp near St Petersburg. A new video alleges that Prigozhin was sexually abused by inmates, an accusation that has the potential to undermine his authority.

According to the harsh code of Russian convicts, men forced into a passive role in sexual abuse are called *petukhi*, or roosters, and are the lowest of the castes in the prison system. Inmates are forbidden to speak or stand close to them, and they are assigned the dirtiest jobs, such as cleaning the latrines.

In an expletive-strewn online video, a man covered in prison tattoos who identifies himself as a crime boss called Sasha Kurara says that Prigozhin performed oral sex on him and other inmates. "He knew his place and he agreed to his place," he



Yevgeny Prigozhin is said to spend \$100m a month on the Wagner Group. It makes up a quarter of Putin's Ukraine army

says. "He is a f***ing faggot, a *petukh*, and anyone who goes into Wagner is a faggot too."

Pro-Kremlin bloggers said the video was a smear campaign that had been orchestrated by Kyiv. Others suggested it was an attempt by Prigozhin's foes in the Russian military or security services to cut him down to size. Although Kurara describes himself as a crime boss who has served 24 years in prison, experts said he was likely to have exaggerated his importance in the criminal hierarchy.

"Prigozhin, never a widely popular man within the elite, has been making even more enemies of late, including within a security apparatus that thinks

he's getting a bit too big for his boots," said Mark Galeotti, who writes about Russia in *The Sunday Times* and is an expert on the country's criminal culture. "Sasha Kurara doesn't seem to have any real authority or profile within the Russian underworld, so it is hard to think someone like that would pick a fight with Prigozhin on his own initiative. The suspicion must be that this was initiated or encouraged by one of Prigozhin's many enemies."

Oleksiy Arestovich, a Ukrainian presidential adviser, said it was unclear whether the accusations were genuine or the result of a plot against Prigozhin. Either way, he said, the video could turn Prigozhin into a "toxic" figure among Wagner fighters. "A loss of credibility could cost him his influence, as well as the [Kremlin's] support and funding of his activities," Arestovich wrote on Telegram.

What is clear is that Prigozhin's importance to the Kremlin is greater than ever. After years of denying his links to

Wagner, Prigozhin admitted in September that he had founded it in 2014. The group has increased its troops in Ukraine from about 1,000 to almost 50,000 since March, according to the US. That figure would represent about a quarter of Russian forces in Ukraine.

"In certain instances Russian military officials are actually subordinate to Wagner's command," said John Kirby, the White House's national security spokesman. "It's pretty apparent to us that Wagner is emerging as a rival power centre to the Russian military and other Russian ministries."

Kirby also said that Wagner had taken delivery of rockets and missiles from North Korea, although both parties deny it. He said the weapons had been paid for by Prigozhin, rather than the Russian military. Wagner spends about \$100 million a month to fund its operations in Ukraine, Kirby said. Analysts believe Prigozhin, who dismissed Kirby's claims as "gossip and speculation", is using the war to advance his

political ambitions. "Prigozhin is behaving like a parallel government," Andrei Kolesnikov, an analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told Bloomberg. "He may be able to compete for power, if not under Putin then after him."

Since stepping out of the shadows, Prigozhin has struck fear into the Russian business elite with calls for "urgent Stalinist repressions" against tycoons seen to be insufficiently enthusiastic about the war.

Wagner is said to have recruited more than 30,000 Russian inmates for the war in Ukraine, granting them their freedom in return for a six-month tour of duty. Those who try to desert or simply fail to follow orders are murdered.

Prigozhin does not deny that he is recruiting inmates, even though there are no grounds under Russian law for amnesty in exchange for military service. He joked recently that Alexei Navalny, the imprisoned opposition leader, who is a bitter critic of Putin's war, should sign up with Wagner in exchange for his release. He also said female prisoners willing to deploy to Ukraine should have their sentences commuted.

It is all a long way from Prigozhin's early years of freedom, when he set up hot-dog stalls in St Petersburg before moving into the supermarket and restaurant businesses, reportedly with the help of crime gangs. He says he met Putin in 2000 when the new Russian leader brought Yoshiro Mori, the Japanese prime minister, to his New Island restaurant in St Petersburg. Two years later Putin returned with President Bush and his wife, Laura. Putin celebrated his 51st birthday there in 2003.

Deals to provide catering services to the ministry of defence, as well as schools and nurseries in Moscow, followed, earning Prigozhin the nickname "Putin's chef". Prigozhin was given the catering contracts on the condition that he set up Wagner, according to *The Bell*, a Russian investigative website.

Some say the claims of sexual abuse seem likely to be fabricated because Prigozhin would not have been able to win the respect of crime bosses in St Petersburg in the 1990s if they had been true. "Bandits wouldn't have sat at the same table as him," said Olga Romanova, a prisoners' rights activist.

If the video is part of a smear campaign, other attacks are likely to follow. There is no guarantee they will be successful. Although Putin has said that he does not consider Prigozhin a friend, there are no indications he is growing weary of the former hot-dog salesman from St Petersburg.

Putin's convict army is a nasty Nazi revival, Ben Macintyre, page 29

