**[A box of gold bars](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772976/a-box-of-gold-bars)**

[Rafia Zakaria](https://www.dawn.com/authors/410/rafia-zakaria) Published August 30, 2023

EVERYBODY inside and outside Russia knows that standing up to Russian President Vladimir Putin is a risky mission. In the past several years, especially since the [war in Ukraine began,](https://www.dawn.com/news/1676939) Putin has only tightened his iron grip. Little news from the outside gets in, and detractors like Alexei Navalny are [banished](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768421) to labour camps. Getting [poisoned by radioactive material](https://www.dawn.com/news/1234537) is a real possibility, and those charged with doing the job think nothing of taking materials like this on to an aircraft full of civilians.

One exception to this rule has been the mob boss Yevgeny Prigozhin — the head of the infamous Wagner militia. Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch, was the commander-in-chief of the Wagner Group, a pro-Russian paramilitary mercenary force that played a crucial role in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is believed that some of the most intense battles of the ongoing war were fought between soldiers of the Wagner Group and the Ukrainian military. A few months ago, however, much to everybody’s surprise, Prigozhin began a [rebellion against Putin](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771843), speaking out against corruption among the Russian president’s inner circle and alleging that the elite were engaging in war profiteering at the expense of ordinary Russians. He openly criticised Putin’s efforts in Ukraine.

Then came the biggest surprise of all. The members of the Wagner militia that had been fighting in Ukraine suddenly turned around and began to [march towards Moscow](https://www.dawn.com/news/1761635). Prigozhin said that he was doing this because of the out-of-control corruption in the war ministry and because the military leadership in Moscow was corrupt and making big blunders for which the soldiers had to pay with their lives. This onward march led to the ‘capture’ of the town of Rostov-on-Don in Russia, and the force then began to advance towards Moscow with the intent of challenging the Russian military leadership and, obviously, Putin himself.

In the meantime, the whole world watched with trepidation to see if a Russian civil war would begin as soon as the force reached Moscow.

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The militia never did reach Moscow. The day after it reportedly seized military sites in Rostov-on-Don, the march was suddenly called off. News emerged that the president of Belarus, a vassal state supporting Russian efforts in Ukraine, said that he had [brokered a truce](https://www.dawn.com/news/1761664) between Putin and Prigozhin. According to the terms of the truce, the Wagner militia would be relocating to Belarus. It was assumed that Prigozhin, as head of the militia, would also be relocating to Belarus. The many charges against Prigozhin, including treason, were not dropped.

Nobody saw anything of Prigozhin in the weeks after the truce. This was unsurprising, since taking on Putin meant inviting certain death, even if a truce had been reached to provide a cover story. Last month, Prigozhin told his Wagner militia that they should prepare for a new journey to Africa. This was interesting. Members of the Wagner militia guarded gold mines in Africa. Now, Prigozhin would be going for a tour of the continent, where he would meet several African leaders. Along with Prigozhin would be the top commanders of the Wagner militia. Everyone would be on the two private jets that Prigozhin owned.

Anybody would pause at this point in the story. One might consider whether it would be a good decision to get on a plane so soon after thumbing your nose at those in charge of the Ukraine invasion project. Planes have been the venue of much Russian intrigue — from polonium poisoning to the crash of a Malaysian airliner that was widely attributed to Russian-controlled forces, but which Moscow denied.

Yet, Prigozhin decided to take his trip to Africa. One of the reasons he was going over there was to salvage his reputation, which had suffered owing to his misguided attempt at a mutiny. He installed himself at the presidential palace in the Central African Republic as a guest of President Faustin Touadéra. About 6,000 members of the Wagner militia are deployed outside Russia, including in Africa. At the palace, Prigozhin reportedly talked with the owners and representatives of various gold mines, which were protected by guards belonging to the Wagner militia. “I need more gold,” he is reported to have said to the Sudanese. Within days, he received a box of gold bars from a mine protected by Wagner personnel.

If there is anything that despotic leaders and oligarchs need to be wary of, it is boxes full of yellow things loaded on to an aircraft. Prigozhin and his team, along with the box of gold bars, embarked on the plane. Half the team went on Prigozhin’s plane and the other half on another jet. This was to be the end of Prigozhin. En route to Russia (where he had, inexplicably, continued to live) an [explosion caused the aircraft to crash](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771858).

Naturally, a story already steeped in betrayal, controversy and surreptitious deals would breed many conspiracy theories. In the hours after the explosion and crash, some began to allege that Prigozhin was not on the plane at all, and that this had been a clever ruse to allow him to evade Putin’s clutches. But soon, however, the Russian authorities [said](https://www.dawn.com/news/amp/1772505) that that DNA gathered from the site matched that of the 10 people who were known to have been on the plane, including Yevgeny Prigozhin. Rebelling against an authoritarian leadership may cost even the meanest of military mercenary leaders his life.

And while it is not known what caused the explosion, there is plenty of speculation that the box of gold bars that had been delivered to the man only days earlier had been responsible. Everything, after all, is fair in love and war, and bombs can be secreted within gold bars.

*The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.*
[rafia.zakaria@gmail.com](https://mailto:rafia.zakaria@gmail.com)

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