### Russia-Ukraine War

## Paramilitary Chief Abruptly Ends Standoff in Russia

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner mercenary group, halted his march on Moscow and withdrew his forces from a southern Russia military hub. Russia dropped charges against Mr. Prigozhin and said he would go to Belarus.

Published June 24, 2023 Updated Aug. 23, 2023

Rostov-on-Don, Russia Wagner mercenaries pull out of headquarters.



Alexander Ermochenko/Reuters

Reuters

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Paul Sonne, Anton Troianovski and Anatoly Kurmanaev

# Here is the latest on the standoff between Prigozhin and the Russian military.

The outlines of a deal that appeared to defuse a rapidly evolving Russian security crisis began to come into focus late Saturday, as the Kremlin announced that a Russian mercenary leader, who for nearly 24 hours led an armed uprising against the country's military leadership, would flee to Belarus and his fighters would escape repercussions.

The announcement capped one of the most tumultuous days in President Vladimir V. Putin's more than 23-year rule in Russia and followed an apparent intervention by the leader of neighboring Belarus, who stepped in to negotiate a solution to the crisis directly with the head of the Wagner private military company, Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, who was leading the revolt.

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The brief uprising in Russia was followed closely in Iran.

President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran, onscreen, and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia in a video conference last month. Mr. Raisi spoke on the phone with Mr. Putin on Saturday, according to Iranian media. Pool photo by Mikhael Klimentyev

Iran, a key ally of Moscow, followed the crisis in Russia on Saturday with minute-by-minute coverage across its news media outlets. Many Iranians wondered how the armed uprising by the Wagner mercenary group and its abrupt end would affect their lives.

Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, spoke on the phone with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, according to Iranian media.

"The recent events in Russia are an internal matter, and Iran supports the rule of law in Russia," said the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry, Nasser Kanaani.

Iran's news media called the uprising against the Kremlin an armed insurrection. Nour News, which is affiliated with Iran's National Security Council, called it a Western-backed plot to defeat Russia in the war in Ukraine.

Iran's state television aired a live report from Moscow with news that Wagner mercenaries, with mediation from Belarus, had halted their march toward the capital. An Iranian reporter with state television said that the situation in the areas around crucial sites, such as the Kremlin and the Foreign and Defense Ministries, appeared to be normal.

Iran and Russia have forged closer military, intelligence and economic ties in the past decade, with Iran shifting its policy away from the West and placing itself in the so-called eastern axis with Russia and China. Iran and Russia also partnered in Syria to fight opposition forces and the Islamic State terrorist group, helping to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power.

The Tehran-based political analyst Sasan Karimi said Russia was a very important ally for Iran.

"It wants Russia to be stable because an unstable, weak Russia will upend all of Iran's policy calculations," Mr. Karimi said.

For the Iranian government, which has faced sanctions, pressure from the West and a domestic uprising against its clerical rule, Russia provided a sense of security in the form of a powerful ally. Iran has also been providing Russia with drones to use in the war in Ukraine and some expertise for evading western sanctions.

For many Iranians opposed to their government, the Russian crisis was a reason to rejoice because Russia was seen as an enemy that has helped keep their oppressor in power.

Thousands of Iranians on Friday and Saturday tuned into Clubhouse, the popular town-hall-style app where analysts and journalists gave updates on the events in Russia.

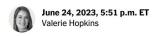
"Putin is caught in a terrible predicament, and his allies will also suffer serious damages from this crisis," wrote Ahmad Zeidabadi, a political analyst close to the reformist faction in Tehran, on Twitter and on Telegram.

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| U.S. officials were briefed that Prigozhin was preparing to take military action against Russia.   |
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| Yevgeny Prigozhin in a screen capture from his video address from Rostov-on-Don,<br>Russia, on Saturday after it was captured by his mercenary troops. Prigozhin Press<br>Service, via Associated Press  |
| American intelligence officials briefed senior military and administration officials on Wednesday that Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the mercenary Wagner Group, was preparing to take military action against senior Russian defense officials, according to officials familiar with the matter. |
| U.S. spy agencies had indications days earlier that Mr. Prigozhin was planning something and worked to refine that material into a finished assessment, officials said.  |
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| June 24, 2023, 5:57 p.m. ET Anatoly Kurmanaev  |
| Wagner fighters stream out of Rostov, the southern Russian military hub they seized overnight.   |
| They left as suddenly as they arrived. The columns of Wagner fighters streamed out of the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don on Saturday night as some residents chanted the group's name.   |
| Among those departing was the mercenary group's founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin. He left the city's military headquarters, according to a photo posted by an affiliated military blogger. The Kremlin said he would go to neighboring Belarus.  |
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#### The Wagner uprising unraveled less than 24 hours after it began.

#### President Alexandr G. Lukashenko of Belarus in Moscow in May. Sputnik/via Reuters

In less than 24 hours, prosecutors charged Yevgeny V. Prigozhin with inciting an armed uprising for launching a march on Moscow, then forgave the Russian mercenary leader and his soldiers after they suddenly turned around and began withdrawing from southern Russia as part of a deal negotiated with Belarus.

As part of the roller coaster developments, Dmitri S. Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, told journalists on Saturday night that the criminal case against Mr. Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner mercenary group, would be dropped. Under the terms of the deal, Mr. Prigozhin will go to Belarus, Mr. Peskov said, while the fighters who rebelled with him would not be prosecuted, given their "service at the front." Wagner fighters who did not participate in the mutiny would have the opportunity to sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense and continue their service, he said, saying their "heroic deeds at the front" would "always be respected."



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One of the most nerve-wracking aspects of a crisis like the one in Russia is the disposition of nuclear weapons. But a senior U.S. administration official said the U.S. government had not detected any change in Russia's arsenal in the last 48 hours and had not changed its own nuclear posture.







| An armed challenge to the Kremlin tests a secretive private army's true strengths.  |
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| Wagner fighters in the center of Rostov-on-Don, Russia, on Saturday. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images  |
| Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, the mercenary leader who led an armed rebellion in Russia on Saturday, was never afraid of a dirty task, many say.  |
| Emerging from jail as the Soviet Union was collapsing, he began his post-criminal career selling hot dogs on street corners in St. Petersburg, Russia. There, he befriended Vladimir V. Putin, then a minor official in the city government, developed a catering business and earned billions on government contracts when his friend Vladimir became prime minister and then president of Russia. |
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| June 24, 2023, 5:08 p.m. ET Paul Sonne  |
| President Vladimir V. Putin hasn't been seen publicly since his video address on Saturday morning, in which he accused the mutinying  |

Wagner fighters of committing treason and stabbing Russia in the back.





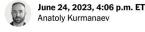
These are the key events that led up to the standoff between Prigozhin and the Russian military.

A frame of a video posted in June on Telegram shows Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Wagner leader, speaking with two Russian military officials in a Russian military headquarters in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don. Agence France-Presse, via Telegram/@Razgruzka\_Vagnera

For years, Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, the Wagner mercenary leader who conducted a brief rebellion against the Russian military, had been a loyal supporter of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.

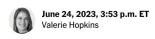
As his mercenaries fought for Russia in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he continued to steer clear of directly criticizing Mr. Putin, even as he increasingly used social media to lambaste Russia's military, accusing its leaders of treason and blaming them for failing to provide his forces with enough resources.

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Wagner armored vehicles began leaving the military hub of Rostov-on-Don, in southwestern Russia, on Saturday night, as a group of local supporters chanted the mercenary group's name, according to videos posted on social media. The departed equipment included a tank that had lodged itself inside the grounds of the city circus, creating an oddly symbolic moment. The fighters' departure from Rostov, whose occupation sent an image of strength, added credibility to the deal apparently reached in talks with the Belarusian leader.



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The Kremlin spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, announced that the criminal case against the Wagner leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, would be dropped. Prigozhin will go to Belarus, Peskov said, and the fighters who rebelled with him would not be prosecuted by law given their "service at the front." Wagner fighters who did not participate in the mutiny can sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense, he said.



June 24, 2023, 3:52 p.m. ET Cassandra Vinograd Reporting from Kyiv

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Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine, seemed surprised by the Wagner leader's decision to turn his forces back from their advance on the Russian capital. "You almost nullified Putin, took control of the central authorities, reached Moscow and suddenly ... you retreat. Because one very specific intermediary with a dubious reputation (#Lukashenko) promised security guarantees from the person (#Putin) who ordered to destroy you in the morning," he wrote on Twitter.



June 24, 2023, 3:52 p.m. ET Cassandra Vinograd Reporting from Kyiv

Still, Podolyak noted that the move was "not without benefit"; he said the Wagner leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, had "humiliated" Putin and the Russian state and shown there was "no longer a monopoly on violence."



June 24, 2023, 3:38 p.m. ET Eric Schmitt



The U.S. secretary of defense, Lloyd J. Austin III, spoke on Saturday with his counterparts from Canada, France, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom to discuss the situation in Russia, the Pentagon said in a statement. "The United States will stay in close coordination with allies and partners as the situation continues to develop," Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder, the Pentagon spokesman, said in the statement.



June 24, 2023, 3:37 p.m. ET Gaya Gupta



President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has called President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko of Belarus to thank him for his negotiations with the Russian mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, according to the Belarusian presidential press service.

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Wagner fighters patrolling Rostov's center saluted residents and appeared to be packing up their belongings, according to videos from Russian state media verified by The New York Times that were posted after their leader's announcement that the fighters would be returning to their training camps.





#### Prigozhin says he is halting his fighters' advance on Moscow.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner Group, in an image taken from a video released by his press service on Saturday. Mr. Prigozhin said he was halting his forces' advance on Moscow. Prigozhin Press Service, via Associated Press

The Russian mercenary leader Yevgeny V. Prigozhin said late Saturday that he was turning around his fighters heading to Moscow to avoid Russian bloodshed, as the security crisis engulfing Russia showed signs of a possible resolution.

In an audio statement posted to Telegram, Mr. Prigozhin said that his forces were within 200 kilometers, or about 125 miles, of Moscow, and had reached that point without any bloodshed among his fighters.

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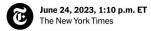
Shortly after Russian mercenary leader Yevgeny V. Prigozhin announced his forces would halt a march on Moscow, President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine said in a message on Twitter that "Today, the world saw that the bosses of Russia do not control anything."

Some Western analysts expressed a cautious wait-and-see attitude toward the sudden reversal by the head of the Wagner private military group. "I don't believe it until I see it," said Dara Massicot, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation. June 24, 2023, 2:11 p.m. ET 0 Andrea Kannapell Videos show banners for the Wagner mercenary group being taken down in the region of St. Petersburg. Other videos show the same is happening in Moscow. June 24, 2023, 1:53 p.m. ET 6 Peter Baker Biden is now en route to Camp David. Accompanying him is Jake Sullivan, his national security adviser, who doesn't usually draw weekend duty at Camp David. June 24, 2023, 1:34 p.m. ET 0 In an audio statement, mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin said he and his Wagner forces were "turning around our columns and returning to field camps according to plan."

President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko of Belarus was in talks on Saturday with the head of the Wagner private military group, Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, according to a statement released by the Belarusian state news agency. The statement noted that Lukashenko was acting with the approval of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.



The leader of Belarus said the head of the Wagner private military group, Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, had agreed to stop the movement of his forces inside the Russian Federation and take other steps to de-escalate the crisis.



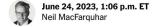


#### Tracking the military convoys approaching Moscow.

Military convoys believed to belong to Yevgeny V. Prigozhin's Wagner forces have been seen at various points along Russia's major M-4 highway, which leads to Moscow. In at least two areas along the route, clashes have broken out. The route shown here is approximate.

In an audio statement later on Saturday, Mr. Prigozhin said he and his Wagner forces were "turning around our columns and returning to field camps according to plan."











Ukraine's most senior military commander said he had spoken by phone with Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, and discussed the situation on the front line "in detail." The commander, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, said in a statement that the conversation touched on Ukraine's counteroffensive, which he told Milley was "proceeding according to plan."



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Turkey's foreign minister, Hakan Fidan, spoke about with the U.S. secretary of state, Antony J. Blinken, about the "latest developments in Russia," the Turkish state broadcaster TRT reported.



June 24, 2023, 12:38 p.m. ET Aurelien Breeden



France "strongly" advised against all travel to Russia on Saturday, citing the "highly volatile military and security situation," the Foreign Ministry said on its website.

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Russian troops have set up roadblocks around Moscow's perimeter as fighters from the Wagner mercenary group were seen moving north along a highway toward Moscow.



June 24, 2023, 12:30 p.m. ET Valerie Hopkins



Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky, a Russian businessman who has sought to unite groups opposing Putin, called on Russians opposed to the regime to arm themselves.

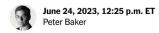
"Now we see that only armed people can resist the dictatorship," Khodorkovsky wrote on his Telegram channel. "Now there is a small window of opportunity when there is chaos on the streets and the security forces are not in control of the situation."



June 24, 2023, 12:30 p.m. ET Valerie Hopkins

He said the dramatic standoff would likely result in further repression.

"If you see the strength in yourself in the future to become those armed people who will oppose Putin or Prigozhin, then it's time to arm yourself," he said. "Prigozhin is not our friend and not even our ally. He is a bandit and a war criminal. But his rebellion is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and there won't be another like it for a long time."





President Biden delayed his departure for Camp David on Saturday to consult with advisers and spoke with European leaders about the crisis. Those on the call included President Emmanuel Macron of France, Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of Britain. "The leaders discussed the situation in Russia," the White House said in a statement. "They also affirmed their unwavering support for Ukraine."





The ruble slides to its lowest point in more than a year.

A currency exchange market in Moscow earlier this month. Maxim Shipenkov/EPA, via Shutterstock

The Russian ruble slid to its weakest level against the dollar in more than a year on Friday, before the trading markets closed and, because of the uncertainty about the political situation in Russia, the current price of the currency was hard to determine.

The ruble fell to a value of 84 per U.S. dollar on Friday, with the Russian business newspaper RBK later reporting that the domestic Tinkoff Bank was offering customers an exchange rate of 94.9 rubles per U.S. dollar.

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It's too soon to say what the developments in Russia will mean for Ukraine's counteroffensive, said Michael Kofman, the director of Russian studies at CNA, a research institute in Arlington, Va. "It doesn't necessarily change the situation at the front," he said in a phone interview, adding that it was unlikely that the Wagner fighters involved had been moved from strategically important locations near the front line in Ukraine.



June 24, 2023, 11:59 a.m. ET Cassandra Vinograd Reporting from Kyiv

While he said the speed of the developments highlighted how heavily focused Russia's military had been on the war in Ukraine, he cautioned that "it's only been a day — less than a day," adding that it was "clear that Prigozhin right now has the advantage but the big question is what's going to happen when and if his columns reach Moscow."



June 24, 2023, 11:59 a.m. ET Valerie Hopkins



Russia's Foreign Ministry warned Western countries against trying to take advantage of political instability in the country "to achieve their Russophobic goals."

"We are convinced that in the near future the situation will find its solution, worthy of the age-old wisdom of the Russian people and the Russian state," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement. "Russian society strongly rejects the attempted armed rebellion that took place in our country, and strongly supports the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin."



June 24, 2023, 11:49 a.m. ET Valerie Hopkins



Moscow's mayor, Sergei Sobyanin, said nonessential workers were being asked to stay at home on Monday. "The situation is difficult," Sobyanin wrote on Telegram. "I ask you to refrain from traveling around the city as much as possible," he said, announcing that some roads may be blocked.



June 24, 2023, 11:43 a.m. ET Andrew Higgins



Belarus, Russia's neighbor and close ally, urged Russians to hear "the voice of reason," warning that "the future of the Slavic world, the fate of millions of our people is being decided" by the unfolding turmoil. A statement issued by the country's Security Council avoided apportioning blame but said that "what is happening is not worth the consequences, the losses that emotional decisions and illegal actions can lead to."

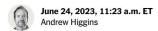








While trying to stop Wagner fighters as they approach Moscow in an armored convoy, Russian officials seem to want to leave some room to maneuver. In view of their military achievements, Wagner mercenaries can still lay down their arms and avoid punishment, Pavel Krasheninnikov, a Russian lawmaker, told Tass, a Russian state news agency.





'We will not let this happen again': Putin evokes Russia's civil war of a century ago.

A truck carrying Russian revolutionaries in 1917, in the city then known as Petrograd, later as Leningrad and now as St. Petersburg. Hulton Archive/Getty Images

When he sent his military into Ukraine 16 months ago, President Vladimir V. Putin trumpeted the so-called special military operation as a replay of Russia's proudest hour — its victory against Nazi Germany in World War II.

On Saturday, however, Mr. Putin was struggling to stop history from repeating itself — not the glories of 1945 but the fratricidal horror of Russia's civil war from 1917 to 1923.

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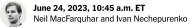


President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's office confirmed that he had a phone call with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, in which he called for restraint and "common sense." Erdogan, who has already positioned himself as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, said that Turkey was "ready to do its part to resolve the events in easiness and calmness as soon as possible," his office said in a statement.



Ukrainian forces recaptured territory in the country's east that had been held by Russia since 2014, according to Kyiv's military. Valeriy Shershen, a military spokesman in the Donetsk region, said "several positions" near Krasnohorivka in the Donetsk region had been reclaimed, Ukrinform, a state-funded news agency, reported.

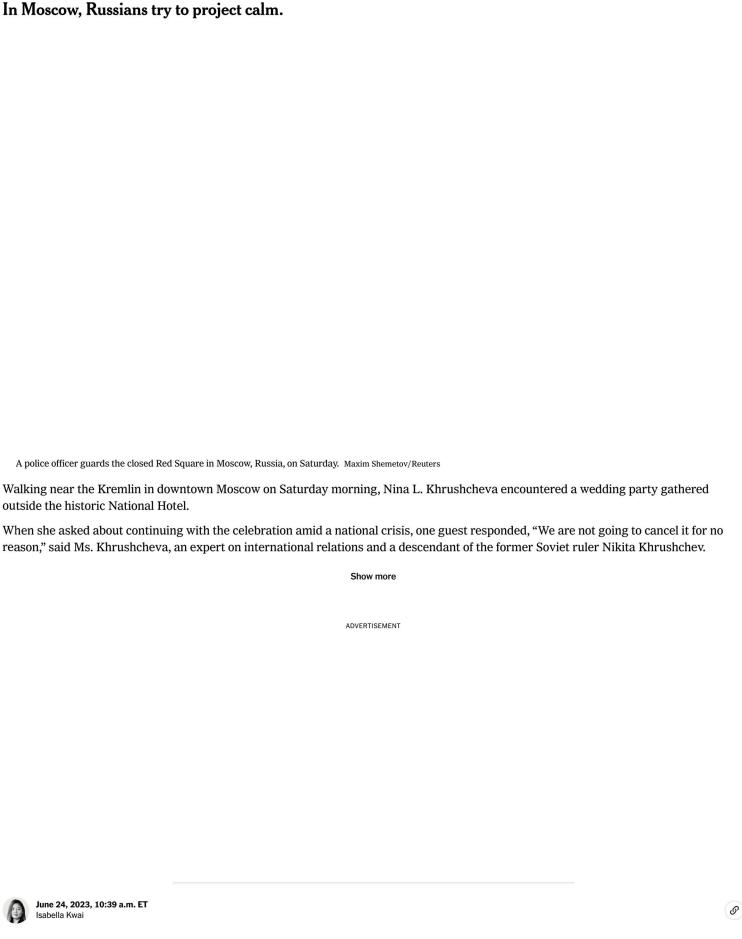




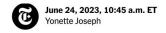


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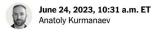
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Britain convened an emergency meeting of government officials earlier on Saturday to discuss the situation in Russia, including the presence of British nationals in Russia, the British foreign office said in a statement.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that Canada's incident response group, an emergency committee, would meet on Saturday to discuss the developments in Russia.



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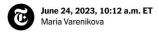
As the Wagner convoy appeared to move rapidly toward Moscow on Saturday, the group's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, remained out of public view. But in his last posted video, in the morning, he claimed to speak from the Rostov military headquarters.

Reuters



June 24, 2023, 10:14 a.m. ET Cassandra Vinograd Reporting from Kyiv 8

The Foreign Ministry of Iran — a key ally of Putin — issued a terse statement about the developments in Russia, saying only that they were an "internal issue" for the country and that Tehran supports the rule of law there.



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Ukrainians have been quick to generate joking memes and videos throughout the war — and the Prigozhin developments were no exception. A popular drone unit commander known by the code name Madyar posted video of himself taking in the news, with loads of popcorn.





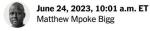
The U.S. points to heightened uncertainty amid Russia's crisis, officials say.

Patrolling a highway at the edge of Moscow on Saturday. Associated Press

United States officials said on Saturday they were closely watching the situation in Russia but did not want to say anything publicly that could give President Vladimir V. Putin reason to blame the United States or Western allies for the turmoil.

"We are monitoring the situation and will be consulting with allies and partners on these developments," Adam Hodge, a National Security Council spokesman, said on Friday night.

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| Kyiv taunts Moscow over the rebellion.   |
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| Members of the Wagner group atop a tank in a street in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, on Saturday. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images   |
| The government in Kyiv taunted the Kremlin on Saturday as Russia faced a rebellion by a mercenary leader whose forces have fought in Ukraine, saying that Moscow's invasion was rebounding on Russia itself.               |
| President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine said that "Russia's weakness is obvious" and portrayed the uprising against Moscow, led by Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, a mercenary and business tycoon, as an example of divine justice. |
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| June 24, 2023, 9:47 a.m. ET Christopher Buckley  |