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Riots in Dagestan and the Prigozhin Revolt: Social-Security Stability Flaws in Russia

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The riots at the airport in Dagestan, Russia, in late October, like the Prigozhin revolt, exposed a fundamental problem of the Russian regime: the security and policing mechanisms do not act effectively against phenomena that were not defined in advance as a threat to the regime. Against the backdrop of increasing domestic problems in Russia that remain unaddressed, tensions that have the potential to turn into protests are mounting. In some cases, the nature of the problem (for example, the fate of Russian men drafted to fight in Ukraine) makes it hard for the system to disparage any potential protest as anti-regime. In future protests, Russia will find it hard to present a rapid response, and the protestors may well enjoy support from the elites – which could lead to cracks in the internal establishment order. These challenges to Russian stability must be considered when analyzing Moscow's behavior, including its interactions with the State of Israel. At the same time, the dangers posed by the growing antisemitism in Russia must be assessed, as the Kremlin does not signal that it sees it as its duty to tackle this trend.

The hate-fueled riots against Jews and Israelis in the Muslim republics in the Russian North Caucasus, which peaked with a riot in late October 2023 at the main airport in Dagestan, reflect a profound phenomenon in Russia's social and security reality. The inadequate response by local authorities, which failed to thwart the attempt to carry out a pogrom – not to mention the failure to prevent its occurrence in the first place – highlight the structural problems within the Russian national security establishment. The bodies that are responsible for maintaining security and public order are in a state of dysfunction. This comes to the fore particularly whenever there is an unusual event – usually involving violence or mass protests on the streets – that has not been identified in advance within the narrative of the Russian establishment.

There are several issues that have been blackened in advance by state propaganda or by comments from officials. According to the regime, these are issues that threaten public and political order, such as protests against the war in

Ukraine, criticism of officials, activity aimed at promoting LGBT+ rights, or promotion of an agenda or narrative that is seen by the regime as too "Western" or "foreign" for Russia. In each case, the defense and policing forces act automatically on the clear understanding that these are threats that must be eradicated. In contrast, cases where public activity occurs regarding issues that have not been identified in advance as problematic challenge the regime. The demonstrations against Jews in the North Caucasus are one such example; the Prigozhin revolt is another.

When it comes to exceptional and unusual events, the Russian security and policing forces have no independent decision making authority. Commanders on the ground are not authorized to exercise their discretion beyond the confines of the directives they were given in advance. There is even a common Russian expression that encapsulates this approach perfectly: "No initiative goes unpunished." Therefore, even when an armed military force (the Wagner Group, under the command of Prigozhin) entered Russia, in violation of every possible law, and took control of the Russian military command in Rostov, no local force tried to stop it, because a threat of this kind was not defined in advance and the commanders in the field had no idea how to respond to events unfolding around them. In modern Russia, which is ruled by security forces (FSB) that long ago turned into a kind of political police that clamps down on any uncoordinated public activity, low-ranking officials in the security forces could not believe that such a major event was not coordinated in advance by those above.

As Prigozhin marched toward Moscow, the propaganda and narrative dissemination machines were delayed for several hours, until senior establishment figures, including President Vladimir Putin himself, cast the incident as a "revolt." Until that point, Prigozhin had not been defined as an "illegitimate player," thanks to his role in the Ukraine campaign and his previous ties to top Russian officials. Moreover, according to a report in the *Moscow Times*, until the night before the revolt, some in the Russian political establishment (members of the party in parliament A Just Russia) still supported Prigozhin and even planned his arrival at the parliament, including an important address.

What happened in Dagestan is different from an armed military revolt, but it is similar in that local security forces were hesitant to put down the rioters. If, instead of a plane from Israel, the arriving flight carried a senior Russian politician who made unflattering remarks about locals who then turned their fury at him, it is likely that security forces would have made preparations and thwarted any attempted rioting. And had riots erupted, they would have been quashed

immediately using whatever force was deemed necessary, and most of the rioters would have been arrested and jailed. This did not happen, simply because the local police were not interested in taking initiative. Moreover, the riot was greeted with a certain degree of understanding because in the weeks after October 7, Russian anti-Israeli propaganda – formulated from the top – paved the way for antisemitic violence without understanding the full significance.

The belated and moderate response of the establishment also reflected the confusion with regard to the rioters. From a legal perspective, of the thousands of people who participated in the riot, law enforcement bodies arrested a few hundred – the vast majority of whom were released without criminal charges being brought against them. From a political perspective, the authorities' response focused primarily on blaming "external forces" for the riot and portraying participants as innocent citizens who fell victim to foreign psychological warfare, furious over "Israeli crimes in Gaza."

The difference in severity in the establishment's response to events – and especially its response while these events are ongoing – depends more on the issue protested than on how the protest is carried out. For many years, and especially since the invasion of Ukraine, the assessment of security threats to Russian domestic stability has been awry. Societal problems have gone unaddressed, the establishment and media outlets loyal to the regime ignore the ever-widening fissures and gaps in Russian society. As a result, any challenge that cannot be labeled by the regime an "external threat" is addressed belatedly, doing little more than putting out fires.

Sensitive and potentially explosive issues continue to arise. Although it is impossible to predict how they will develop, some are certainly on the agenda: protests by the wives and mothers of soldiers who were called up for reserves a year ago and who are not expected to return until the war ends; criticism from soldiers and military bloggers over the negligent and failed conduct of commanders on the frontlines, which has led to unnecessary causalities; and displays of regional power by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov (who recently forced governors of neighboring Muslim regions to grant his 15-year-old son a series of honorary titles), which could anger nationalist groups in Russia, including within the defense establishment.

Common among these issues is that the regime finds it hard to create a dominant narrative about them, whereby the "destabilizing" factor is denigrated in advance and the establishment is able to prepare its justification for dispersing and clamping down on the activity and/or protest. Moreover, each of these

aforementioned issues might potentially garner widespread support among the Russian people and even parts of the elite. Therefore, if and when these areas of tension reach a breaking point, the protestors could gain support from some elements within the elites, at a time when the official approach (establishment propaganda) has not yet been formulated. In such cases, the stability of the regime is undermined, since it will find it hard to respond quickly, while the active side – the protesters and their supporters – could determine facts on the ground and even forge the developing narrative in such a way that the authorities would have to adapt their response in real time. It could even force the regime to contain or accept the protestors' demands.

There are two key takeaways for Israel here. First, Israel is used to a stable regime in Russia (some would say monolithic) that conducts its foreign policy in an ordered and calculated manner. But this stability can no longer be taken for granted. Notwithstanding the image of unity, it is extremely difficult – perhaps even impossible – to determine exactly how fragile the Putin-led regime really is. This is not to say that the regime is on the verge of collapse, but Israel must take into consideration scenarios in which the rigid domestic order is undermined.

Second, it does not currently appear that the Russin leadership has any interest in investing resources (primarily public relations and propaganda resources) in the fight against antisemitism. Rather than take unpopular measures, it is much more likely that the regime will opt to maintain the status quo: ignoring the source of the problem, which is the anti-Israel propaganda and the socio-economic neglect of the semiautonomous regimes in the North Caucasus – and containing events that have already occurred, in order to not stir up emotions or make sudden changes to the official messaging. This situation leaves an opening for fresh antisemitic incidents in Russia, as long as the war in Gaza and the related anti-Israel rhetoric continue. Israel must take this into account and prepare to deal with the threats and dangers to Israelis and Jewish communities across Russia. This involves supplying additional security when needed, issuing travel warnings, and even preparing for an increase in Jewish immigration.

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