

## Yevgeny Prigozhin's 'toxic' media empire left in Kremlin limbo

Vladimir Putin has blocked access to mutinous warlord's websites but his troll accounts remain active

Anastasia Stognei and Max Seddon in Riga 12 HOURS AGO

A week after Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner group's mutiny failed in June, the warlord's online media empire announced it would shut its doors and "depart the country's news agenda".

But since then Prigozhin's notorious troll army has kept up its frenetic posting rate online, while the former caterer has remained in Russia — even [meeting Vladimir Putin](#) in the Kremlin — despite a deal to leave for exile in Belarus.

The curious afterlife of Prigozhin's fake media empire is a window on a bigger challenge for Putin's Russia: the regime is still struggling to unwind its tangled ties to the warlord, even after Wagner came close to overthrowing it.

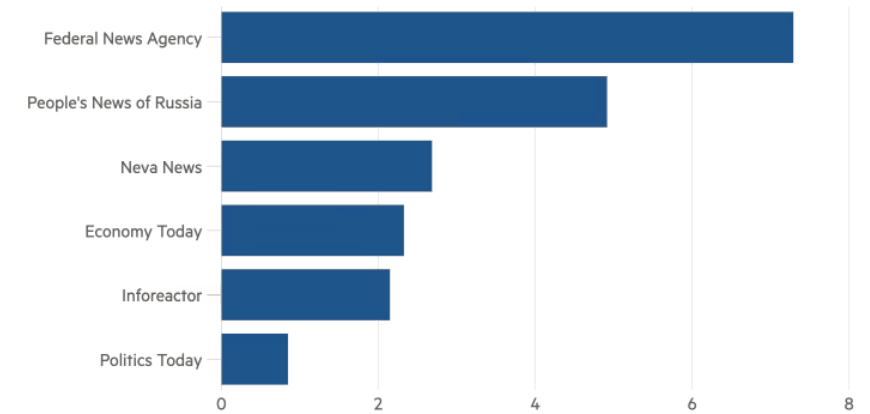
Russia's internet censor has banned [Prigozhin](#) websites and some troll accounts pivoted to criticise the warlord. But the media enterprise still stands in post-mutiny limbo. Prigozhin appears so central to the Kremlin's subterranean life — from covert military escapades to troll farms — that extracting him has proven difficult, according to Russian elites, people familiar with the media business, and western officials.

With his businesses in no-man's-land, other members of the elite are discussing filling the huge Prigozhin-shaped hole in Russia's political system — and taking over the billions in funding under the table that come with it.

"The system is a criminal organisation. Prigozhin is part of that," a sanctioned Russian oligarch said. "People are making money on the war, and wealth is being redistributed. This internal corruption is a systemic feature."

## Prigozhin's media empire reaches millions of users

Unique users in 31 days from June 10 2023 (mn)



Source: LiveInternet Counter  
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Within hours of [Wagner's march towards Moscow](#), Russian secret services raided the headquarters of Prigozhin's media empire and troll farm, which are grouped together under an umbrella company called "Patriot".

Rather than wait to potentially serve a new owner close to the Kremlin, Patriot declared on social media that it would shut down. But its ultimate fate has yet to be decided, according to people familiar with its operations.

"I know how [Patriot] media works," said Alexander Ionov, who has been sanctioned and charged by the US over working with Prigozhin and the Russian security services to undermine US elections. "The group was put on hold, not closed, because at the moment there are more urgent things to deal with," Ionov said. He added that commercial buyers could be interested in the holding's "very large patriotic audience".

Prigozhin's staff are speaking in riddles about the group's future. Alexander Krasnobayev, the head of Neva News, a Patriot-owned news site, told the Financial Times he had "paused editorial work" but hoped to resume it, before abruptly speaking Ukrainian, then switching back to Russian to say "glory to Russia!" and "America, rot in hell!"

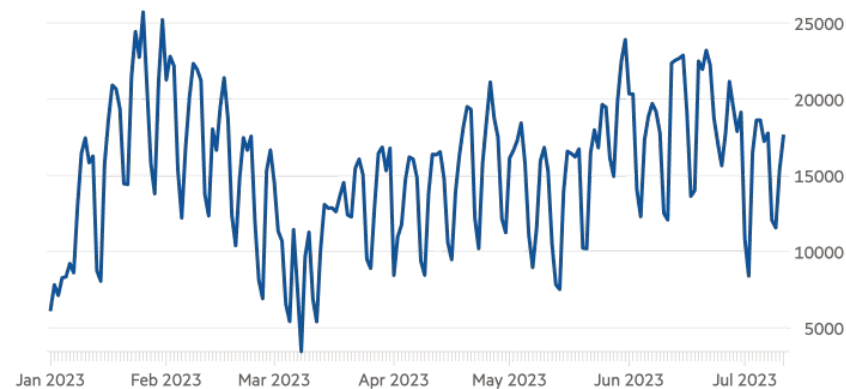
Asked why the site's social media accounts said its had closed down, Krasnobayev suggested this was simply "to keep the intrigue going".

Adding to that mystery are Prigozhin's legion of anonymous troll accounts, which have continued to post as before, according to Antibot4Navalny and Chef's Trap, two anonymous volunteer groups that track Prigozhin's online activities.

"The mutiny did not interrupt the trolls' work for a second," said one of the activists, who gave their name as Antibot. But a new owner could be only a matter of time, Antibot added. "The farm is a rare commodity . . . If Prigozhin ends up losing control of it, it will quickly be assigned to another structure close to the Kremlin."

### Prigozhin's troll farm remains active on Russian social media despite the failed mutiny in June

Number of comments posted on Vkontakte per day by trolls linked to Prigozhin



Source: Chef's Trap  
© FT

The prize of taking over Prigozhin's old operations is considerable. Though Wagner was primarily funded through the Russian defence ministry, the warlord's complex relations with the elite long predated the paramilitary group — and gave him access to more sources of funding.

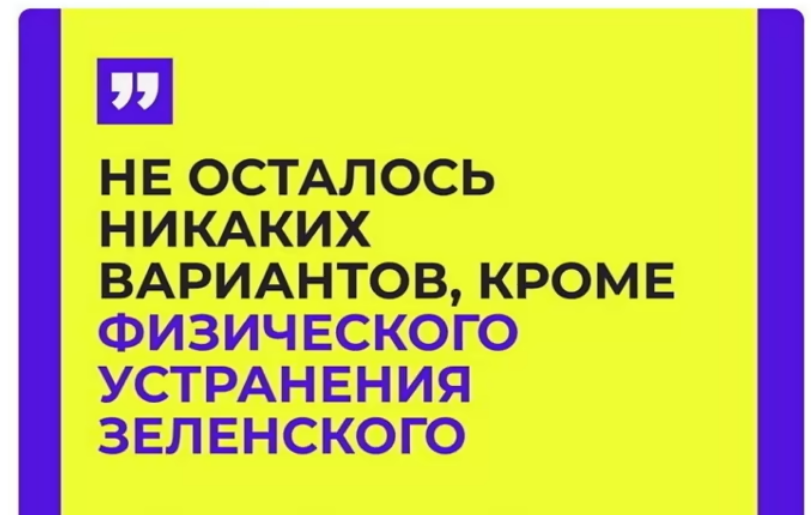
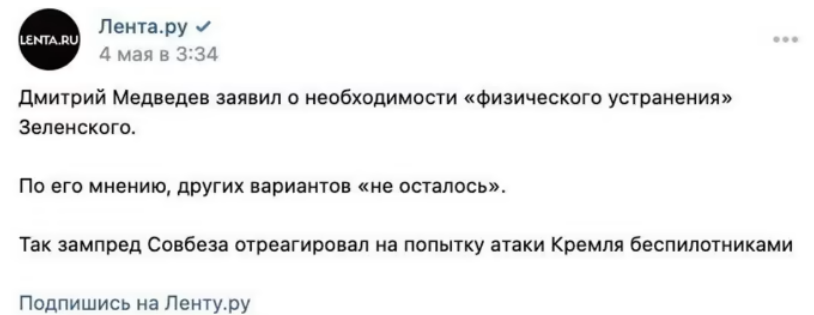
"Prigozhin got along with absolutely everyone," a former senior Kremlin official said. "[The Kremlin] were asking pretty much everyone to give him money."

In the wake of the mutiny, the Kremlin for the first time disclosed the vast sums once used to finance his companies — money that will now presumably go elsewhere. "I hope that nobody stole anything during that work, or, let's say, didn't steal that much," Putin said in late June.

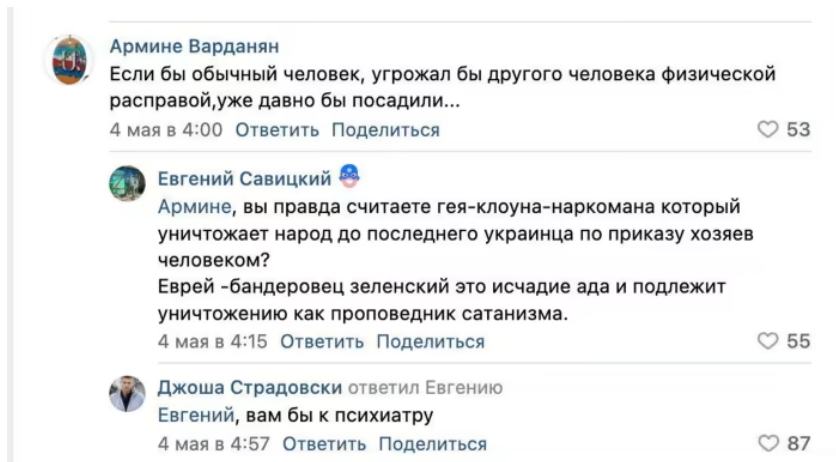
The extraordinary disclosure of what was a closely guarded, fiercely denied Kremlin secret attempted to underscore Prigozhin's status as a contractor, rather than independent political player. But it also indicated potential paths to enrichment for others: Russian state media put the total funding to Prigozhin at as much as Rbs1,700bn (\$18.8bn) over the past decade.

Prigozhin first began tapping the Kremlin's largesse in the 2000s; the future president Putin had been a regular diner at a Prigozhin-owned restaurant in their hometown of St Petersburg.

By the turn of the next decade, after turning his role as "Putin's chef" into a billion-dollar business supplying food on public contracts, Prigozhin expanded into media. Yevgeny Zubarev, Patriot's director, called it "working for the state".



Russian newspaper Lenta.ru mentions Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a post



Middle post: A troll replies calling Zelenskyy homophobic and antisemitic slurs and accuses him of 'destroying his people'

Starting with a staff of just 20, according to Zubarev, Prigozhin's trolls pretended to be ordinary Russians online and ruthlessly attacked opposition figures such as anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny, some of whom had emerged among the country's most popular bloggers.

The trolls' effectiveness was difficult to judge, but their reach — and financing — grew as people like Navalny led a significant challenge to Putin's return to the presidency in 2011. The Kremlin began to crack down on independent media in response to the protests — and made more money available to those willing to attack them.

Before long, Prigozhin's operations were so flush with state cash that "everyone was stealing", according to a person familiar with their inner workings at the time.

"You have to know Yevgeny Viktorovich [Prigozhin]. He's completely fucking crazy. But if you blow dust in his eyes the right way, show him a result, and promise him more, he'll give money without a second thought," the person said.

The graft became a critical feature of Prigozhin's operations, they added, with staff who dwelled on real results "shunted away or sacked".

By 2017, Prigozhin's group had reached millions of users, building a network of dozens of distinctly pro-Kremlin news websites that pretended to be real journalistic enterprises, covering lifestyle, business, city news and politics.

Even after being blocked for most of the past month, sites under the Patriot umbrella have still drawn more than 20mn users — an audience comparable to that of big state media such as Russian RT, data from LiveInternet shows.

Even with that audience, the business model ran huge expenses and raised little advertising revenue, making them financially reliant on Kremlin sponsorship.

In the past year alone, according to Putin, Prigozhin's businesses received more than Rbs270bn from the budget — a sum comparable with the annual profit at Sberbank, Russia's largest lender.

Though much of the funding went to arming Wagner and paying its fighters, the media empire also enjoyed access to substantial sums, according to people familiar with its workings.

"Who would take it? It is toxic, he [Prigozhin] created it primarily for himself, and it is also expensive. I believe there was no business there, he was just pouring [Kremlin] money in it," a senior official in the St Petersburg government said of the media business.

To complicate matters, Prigozhin said he ran his operation almost entirely on cash. Following his failed mutiny, state media published photos of suitcases full of cash found at the warlord's garish mansion and reported that security services had seized a minivan heaving with banknotes at a hotel he owns.

Prigozhin retorted that the minivan stuffed full of cash was only one of three, and insisted he had received all the money legally from the state.

"When we were working in Africa, and in Ukraine, and other countries, when we were giving America nightmares [through the troll farm] then everyone was fine with cash," the warlord said on Saturday.

At one point during Putin's 2018 re-election campaign — a period Patriot director Zubarev said the group was "particularly active" — Prigozhin's representatives even approached a big Russian social network with an offer to buy the company, according to a former senior executive.

"They claimed to work for 'a cook' and offered to pay in cash for our platform. They mentioned minivans full of banknotes and assured me that they were 'not counterfeit', as if that was the only possible concern," he said.

The murky nature of Prigozhin's operations means their true value could be greater still, according to one person familiar with their inner workings. "We don't know about all of [the contracts]. There are so many that were set up through frontmen that appropriated the dough," the person said. "There's just so damn much, billions, billions, billions. He's a very rich man."