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From “Putin’s Chef” to Rebel Warlord: Yevgeny Prigozhin, Media Power, and the Art of Political Survival in Russia

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Abstract

This article examines Yevgeny Prigozhin’s transformation from shadowy caterer to rebel warlord, analyzing how his media empire and political fortunes evolved in late-Putin Russia. Using a critical case study with historically grounded, process-oriented analysis, we refine *adekvatnost’* as a relational skill that travels from media practice into authoritarian politics, enabling elites to anticipate shifting red lines and turn improvisation into power.

First, we show how Prigozhin’s “troll factory” and later the Patriot Media Group built a metrics-driven system blending astroturfing, pseudo-journalism, and war reporting, providing the Kremlin with deniable influence operations. Secondly, we demonstrate how this media capital financed Wagner’s expansion, allowing Prigozhin to perform authenticity on the front line – subsequently amplified by state media as patriotic spectacle.

Finally, we argue that the Kremlin’s post-2020 turn toward bureaucratized digital authoritarianism made Prigozhin’s personalized disruption obsolete and ultimately

threatening, producing his break with the regime. Tracing how *adekvatnost'* moved between media and politics across his career, the article links propaganda entrepreneurship to the political economy of oligarchic media and situates Prigozhin's agency within the institutional architecture of contemporary Russian authoritarianism.

Keywords

Prigozhin – disinformation – *adekvatnost'* – troll factories – media power – oligarchy

1 Introduction

A few people in contemporary Russia will get the mention in future uncensored history books. Yevgeny Prigozhin, a notorious media tycoon,¹ creator of the mercenary Wagner group² and the person whose “troll factory” attempted to meddle in the US presidential elections in 2016,³ will most probably be one of them. Through operations ranging from foreign interference and information warfare abroad⁴ to domestic propaganda at home,⁵ Prigozhin has blurred the boundaries between Russia's internal and external instruments of influence. He first became known for heading the “troll factory” and the Wagner group,⁶ later as one of the most visible public faces of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and subsequently as a critic of how the invasion was conducted, before finally initiating a military mutiny against the Kremlin. Prigozhin's death in August 2023 provides an opportunity to examine his rise and fall to explore a key question for authoritarian regimes and for this paper: how does the career of Prigozhin illustrate the paradoxical nature of political survival in

1 Marlène Laruelle and Kevin Limonier, “Beyond ‘Hybrid Warfare’: A Digital Exploration of Russia's Entrepreneurs of Influence,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37, no. 4 (2021): 318–335, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2021.1936409>.

2 Kimberly Marten, “Whither Wagner? The Consequences of Prigozhin's Mutiny and Demise,” *Survival* 65, no. 5 (2023): 45–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2261245>.

3 Serge Poliakoff and Florian Toepfl, “Prigozhin's Propaganda Team: The St Petersburg Internet Research Agency (2013–2021),” *Europe-Asia Studies* 78, no. 1 (2026): 91–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2025.2588334>.

4 Poliakoff and Toepfl, “Prigozhin's Propaganda Team,”: 91–112.

5 Serge Poliakoff, “Trolls Behind the Mask of Journalists: How Yevgeny Prigozhin's Patriot Media Group Was Organized,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 72, no. 5 (2025): 416–428, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2024.2438336>.

6 Marten, “Russia's use of semi-state security forces”: 181–204.

late Putin's Russia, where the very skills that facilitate a meteoric rise can also precipitate a dramatic downfall?

Unlike other works on Prigozhin and his mutiny that look at him as Putin's chef⁷ or the head of mercenaries,⁸ we propose treating Prigozhin primarily as a media oligarch, following an approach already used by Laruelle and Limonier.⁹ Much of the journalistic and biographical literature still frames him largely as a sadistic enforcer whose wealth and impunity flowed almost entirely from his proximity to Putin, treating his trajectory as a derivative function of presidential patronage.¹⁰ During his lifetime, Prigozhin was labelled an "entrepreneur of influence" by academic literature for investing his own money and social capital to build influence abroad in exchange for rewards from the Kremlin.¹¹ However, as Badanin and Rubin note, Prigozhin's rise was also shaped by a pattern of calculated improvisation: he repeatedly acted without direct Kremlin approval, testing the boundaries of acceptable behavior to gauge the regime's tolerance. The absence of punishment was read as tacit endorsement, encouraging him to push further and perform the system's dirtiest work. Without disputing Putin's protection or Prigozhin's brutality, we trace critical junctures where he tested the Kremlin's informal "red lines" and seized opportunities.

While Laruelle and Limonier analyzed how foreign media operations could be exchanged for political and material rewards from the Kremlin, this paper argues that the accumulation of media assets did not merely function as a tradable resource within a patronage system but gradually transformed Prigozhin into a political actor. The possession and expansion of media assets initially increased his leverage within the Kremlin-centered system of rewards; over

7 Il'ya Barabanov and Denis Korotkov, *Nash Biznes – Smert'. Polnaya Istoriya ChVK "Vagner" i Ee Osnovatelya Evgeniya Prigozhina* [Our Business Is Death: The Complete History of the Wagner PMC and Its Founder Yevgeny Prigozhin] (Riga: Meduza, 2024); Anna Arutunyan and Mark Galeotti, *Downfall: Putin, Prigozhin, and the Fight for the Future of Russia* (New York: Random House, 2024).

8 Owen Wilson, *The Wagner Group: Yevgeny Prigozhin's Mercenaries and Their Ties to Vladimir Putin* (London: Gibson Square Books, 2024); Marten, "Whither Wagner?": 45–64; Jørdar Østbø, "Strategic Transgressions: Russia's Deviant Sovereignty and the Myth of Evgenii Prigozhin," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 29, no. 2 (2021): 183–207.

9 Laruelle and Limonier, "Beyond 'Hybrid Warfare'": 318–335.

10 Andrey Zakharov, Katya Arenina, Ekaterina Reznikova, and Mikhail Rubin, "Chef and Chief: Portrait of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Personal Sadist of the Russian President," *Proekt*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.proekt.media/en/portrait-en/evgeny-prigozhin/>; Roman Badanin and Mikhail Rubin, *Tsar sobstvennoy personoy: Kak Vladimir Putin obmanul vsekh nas* [The Tsar in Propria Persona: How Vladimir Putin Fooled Us All] (Place of publication: BAbok, 2025).

11 Laruelle and Limonier, "Beyond 'Hybrid Warfare'": 318–335.

time, however, this growing symbolic and communicative power enabled him to project influence back onto the system itself, ultimately contributing to a confrontation with the center of it, the Kremlin itself.

Although Prigozhin's business career began in the early 1990s, until the late 2000s he was mainly known as an owner of restaurants in Saint-Petersburg with a wide spanning network of influential contacts (including Putin). It's only in the early 2010s, with the foundation of the Internet Research Agency (IRA), he reached state-wide influence and power. The IRA's initial expansion coincided with the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014,¹² and its subsequent growth unfolded in parallel with the rising prominence of the Wagner Group, elevating Prigozhin to Russia's media elite while enjoying unique independence due to personal loyalty from Putin. Media made Prigozhin's influence visible,¹³ and his use of it after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 made him the Kremlin's nemesis.

Prigozhin's phenomenon, while deeply rooted in Russia's specific politico-criminal milieu, media and digital control system,¹⁴ can also be seen in the global context of the concentration of power in the hands of a few super rich with the potent media assets who possess the wide network of allied politicians and diversified set of businesses that help them fund their media empires. These are all the criteria of this group of super rich that emerged in the late 2000s across Central and Eastern Europe,¹⁵ but consolidation of media assets in the hands of the super-rich became a global trend in the next decade.¹⁶ This type of ownership clearly impacts the quality of news output

12 Poliakoff and Toepfl, "Prigozhin's Propaganda Team," 91–112.

13 Poliakoff, "Trolls Behind the Mask of Journalists": 416–428.

14 Ibid.

15 Angelika Wyka, 'Berlusconization of the Mass Media in East Central Europe – The New Danger of Italianization?', *Kakanien Revisited* 1 (January 2007): 1–5; Václav Štětka, 'The Rise of Oligarchs as Media Owners', in *Media and Politics in New Democracies: Europe in a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jan Zielonka (Oxford University Press, 2015); Taras Fedirko, 'Liberalism in Fragments: Oligarchy and the Liberal Subject in Ukrainian News Journalism', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 29, no. 2 (2021); Auksė Balčytienė, Péter Bajomi-Lázár, Václav Štětka, and Miklós Sükösd, 'Oligarchization, de-Westernization and Vulnerability: Media between Democracy and Authoritarianism in Central and Eastern Europe', *Tidsskrift for Medier, Erkendelse Og Formidling* 3, no. 1 (2015).

16 A Ali, 'Media Ownership and Control Versus Press Freedom in a Democratic Africa', *Journal of Mass Communication & Journalism* 05, no. 239 (2014): 1–5; Oberiri Destiny Apuke, 'Exploring the Issues of Media Ownership and Control in Nigeria', *New Media and Mass Communication* 55 (2016): 12–15; Eli M. Noam, *Who Owns the World's Media?: Media Concentration and Ownership Around the World* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Jason Buckweitz and Eli M. Noam, *Media Ownership and Concentration in the United States of America, 1984–2023* (2025), <https://gmicp.org/media-ownership-and-concentration-in-the-united-states-of-america-1984-2023/>.

where newsrooms will pay attention to the owner's political preferences. The media outlet's agenda, even in democratic states, will be twisted in line with political allegiances¹⁷ and the media outlet will be used to influence public opinion and aim at behavioral change of the potential audience.¹⁸

The position of Prigozhin as a media oligarch is somewhat similar to other cases of authoritarian regimes where loyal super rich reinforce the authoritarian governments with their media outlets' messaging.¹⁹ This helps these regimes, called spin dictatorships, to sustain the facade of democracy and keep the limited level of repressions while investing a lot in propaganda.²⁰ However, Prigozhin's case presents a crucial distinction from his counterparts, both in authoritarian and democratic contexts, thereby offering a unique analytical lens.

While media tycoons in democracies like Rupert Murdoch or Jeff Bezos wield immense influence, their power is mediated by regulatory frameworks, journalistic ethics (however compromised), and competitive market pressures.²¹ Their success hinges on commercial viability and influencing public opinion within a pluralistic, albeit concentrated, media landscape. Similarly, loyalist media oligarchs in other authoritarian states and "entrepreneurs of influence" in Russia often operate as junior partners to the regime, their primary role being the amplification of a state-sanctioned narrative in exchange for political protection and economic privilege.²² Their survival depends on demonstrating unwavering loyalty and staying within clearly, if informally, demarcated boundaries.

17 Justin Schlosberg, *Media Ownership and Agenda Control: The Hidden Limits of the Information Age* (Routledge, 2016).

18 Guy Grossman, Yotam Margalit, and Tamar Mitts, 'How the Ultrarich Use Media Ownership as a Political Investment', *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 4 (2022): 1913–31.

19 Adam Szeidl and Ferenc Szucs, 'Media Capture Through Favor Exchange', *Econometrica* 89, no. 1 (2021): 281–310; Alper H. Yagci and Cem Oyvatt, 'Partisanship, Media and the Objective Economy: Sources of Individual-Level Economic Assessments', *Electoral Studies* 66 (August 2020): 102–135.

20 Daniel Treisman and Sergei Guriev, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

21 Rodney Benson and Victor Pickard, 'The Slippery Slope of the Oligarchy Media Model', *The Conversation*, August 11, 2017, <http://theconversation.com/the-slippery-slope-of-the-oligarchy-media-model-81931>.

22 Sofie Syarif, 'The Media in Indonesia: Journalism Between the State and Oligarchs' (Perry World House, 2025), accessed August 20, 2025, <https://perryworldhouse.upenn.edu/news-and-insight/the-media-in-indonesia-journalism-between-the-state-and-oligarchs/>; Fedirko, 'Liberalism in Fragments. Oligarchy and the Liberal Subject in Ukrainian News Journalism'. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale. Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 29 (2). <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/saas/29/2/soca13063.xml>.

The case of Prigozhin shows both how playing by the rules of the ever-changing regime, where media play a key role in keeping the regime afloat, can make one rich individual very powerful and how the potential cracks of this regime can make the same person break the rules and transcend his role in the hierarchy of the authoritarian state. His dramatic rise and even more dramatic fall highlight that success in such an environment requires more than just connections, wealth, or control over media assets. It demands a highly attuned, intuitive grasp of the system's unwritten rules, personal loyalties, and shifting red lines. Prigozhin's mutiny and the subsequent death in the plane crash in August 2023 showcase the consequences when one's reading the unwritten rules fails.

2 Conceptualizing Success and Failure in Authoritarianism

In the early 2010s, ethnographic research in Russian newsrooms led one of the authors to observe that both junior reporters and senior media professionals navigated the authoritarian media environment through a finely tuned capacity to balance professional productivity with acute political caution.²³ This capacity was referred to by respondents as *adekvatnost'*²⁴ – a term later conceptualized as the intuitive management of work in a volatile political setting, where the appropriateness of speech and action is constantly calibrated against shifting political and socio-economic conditions. Although *adekvatnost'* shares an affinity with self-censorship, it is better seen as an active, contextually intelligent skill that not only mitigates risk but also, paradoxically, preserves space for creativity. It encapsulates the ability to sustain one's career and produce high-quality work despite, and sometimes because of, the pressures of an authoritarian system. This dynamic resonates with Foucault's concept of governmentality, where power is not merely repressive but also productive, actively shaping conduct rather than simply forbidding it.²⁵ This understanding is also informed by Bourdieu's insights on the professional field, where political sensitivity becomes an embedded part of a journalist's

23 Elisabeth Schimpfoss and Ilya Yablokov, "Coercion or conformism? Censorship and self-censorship among Russian media personalities and reporters in the 2010s." *Democratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 20, no. 2 (2014): 295–312.

24 "The ability to react appropriately to the conditions in which you find yourself" – as one reporter explained. See, Schimpfoss and Yablokov, "Coercion or conformism?": 308.

25 Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, Peter Miller, and an Interview with Michel Foucault, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

habitus.²⁶ Practitioners engage in constant boundary work, internalizing a tacit knowledge of what can be said and what line must not be crossed.

The developmental arc of *adekvatnost'* mirrors the civilizing process described by Norbert Elias, where external societal constraints are gradually internalized as individual self-restraint.²⁷ Within newsrooms, this is reinforced through what sociologists call organizational socialization, a process in which younger journalists observe senior colleagues modelling acceptable practice and enacting informal sanctions against transgressors.²⁸ Such an apprenticeship fosters a pervasive culture of anticipatory obedience.²⁹ This is a proactive form of self-censorship where individuals intuit the desires of those in power and act accordingly, making direct orders largely unnecessary. This mechanism, which overlaps with Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence, makes overt repression less essential because potential dissenters have already learned to silence themselves in advance.³⁰ Yet this process yields more than mere conformity; it produces a distinct and effective mode of creative output. An adept practitioner of *adekvatnost'* can craft content that simultaneously meets professional standards, captivates audiences, and serves the state's political imperatives.

From a political economy perspective, this dynamic serves the mutual interests of the state and its allied corporate media owners. The result is a patronage-like system, reminiscent of Weber's model of patrimonial authority, in which personal loyalty, trust, and reciprocal protection structure the entire field.³¹ Within this ecosystem, *adekvatnost'* itself becomes a valuable form of capital. Mastery of it grants access to resources, insider status, and career security, while a failure to demonstrate it risks professional marginalization. Indeed,

26 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

27 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

28 Talya N. Bauer and Berrin Erdogan, 'Organizational Socialization: The Effective Onboarding of New Employees', in *APA Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Vol 3: Maintaining, Expanding, and Contracting the Organization* (American Psychological Association, 2011); Talya N. Bauer, Todd Bodner, Berrin Erdogan, Donald M. Truxillo, and Jennifer S. Tucker, 'Newcomer Adjustment during Organizational Socialization: A Meta-Analytic Review of Antecedents, Outcomes, and Methods', *Journal of Applied Psychology (US)* 92, no. 3 (2007): 707–21.

29 Wendy Lower, '“Anticipatory Obedience” and the Nazi Implementation of the Holocaust in the Ukraine: A Case Study of Central and Peripheral Forces in the General bezirk Zhytomyr, 1941–1944', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 16, no. 1 (2002): 1–22; Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Crown, 2017).

30 Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, 'The Spiral of Silence A Theory of Public Opinion', *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (1974): 43–51.

31 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (University of California Press, 1978).

many journalists do not perceive *adekvatnost'* as a constraint. They frame it as a marker of professional sophistication – evidence of their ability to negotiate competing demands, retain personal integrity where possible, and work creatively within narrow margins.³² This framing reflects what the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld calls “cultural intimacy”: a shared, often ambivalent, insider knowledge of how the system truly works, which enables practitioners to operate effectively within it while tacitly acknowledging its limitations.³³

Crucially, while *adekvatnost'* emerged from journalistic practice, its core logic – situational awareness, relational calibration, and the internalization of authoritarian constraints – describes a broader mode of action that transcends the media field. Following Bourdieu, fields such as media and politics are inter-related spaces structured by homologous power relations and governed by similar expectations of loyalty, risk management, and symbolic capital. The dispositions cultivated in one field can thus be transposed into another when actors move across these domains or operate at their intersections.

This logic extends into the political arena, where *adekvatnost'* is an essential survival skill for elites (although in different contexts this skill could be named differently). The psychological process of internalizing external pressure leads to self-imposed compliance and censorship.³⁴ In this sense, political actors perform the same interpretive labor as journalists: they read signals, anticipate shifts in the mood of the regime, and calibrate their actions accordingly. What changes is not the underlying logic but the scale and stakes of its application. This behavior supports the three pillars of authoritarian stability: legitimization, repression, and co-optation.³⁵ As Bakir describes, this, among other things, creates a “vicious circle” where loyalty-based appointments and controlled knowledge production discourage dissenting advice, ensuring regime stability at the expense of effective governance.³⁶

32 Elisabeth Schimpfoss and Ilya Yablokov, “Post-socialist self-censorship: Russia, Hungary, Latvia”, *European Journal of Communication* 35 (2020): 29–45.

33 Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, 2nd edn. (Routledge, 2014).

34 Daniel Bar-Tal, ‘Self-Censorship as a Socio-Political-Psychological Phenomenon: Conception and Research’, *Political Psychology* 38 (S1): 37–65 (2017).

35 Johannes Gerschewski, ‘The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes’, in *Comparing Autocracies in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2014).

36 Caner Bakir, ‘The Vicious Circle of Policy Advisory Systems and Knowledge Regimes in Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes’, *Policy and Society* 42, no. 3 (2023): 419–39.

In Russia's system of deliberate and selective repression, *adekvatnost'* becomes a critical survival skill.³⁷ The calculated unpredictability of sanctions makes the primary danger for elites not breaking rules, but misreading ambiguous signals. The political order operates on informal networks and clan loyalties as much as formal rules, demanding navigation of internal rivalries. According to Taylor, this necessitates following an unwritten "code" of loyalty and network literacy, operationalized through the same subtle calibrations of speech and action.³⁸

Ultimately, whether in media or politics, *adekvatnost'* is a form of relational intelligence – a constant scanning of the social and political environment for cues and threats. It is the skill of interpreting subtle signals, managing peer dynamics, and promoting innovation, but always within the unstated bounds of loyalty. It allows ambitious actors to remain relevant, influential, and trustworthy without needing explicit instruction.³⁹ In sum, by tracing *adekvatnost'* across professional boundaries, we can see it not as a domain-specific journalistic virtue but as a transferable modality of authoritarian adaptability – a habitus of survival that operates wherever actors must align initiative with obedience. This conceptual move allows us to link media production with political behavior under the same governing rationality of adequacy to power.

Through the figure of Prigozhin we demonstrate how the same anticipatory logic that sustains professional survival in media can enable political ascent. Although the stakes are far higher in the political field, the same micro-calibrations of initiative and obedience continue to operate, making *adekvatnost'* a transferable modality of authoritarian adaptability. This theoretical extension allows us to link media production and political behavior under a shared rationality of adequacy to power.

The concept of *adekvatnost'* thus provides a powerful lens for connecting the lived, daily experiences of individuals with the grand structural forces that sustain authoritarian rule. It reveals how power is maintained not just through overt coercion, but through the routinized, self-regulated judgments of actors

37 See, for instance, Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

38 Brian D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

39 As Aleksandra Prokopenko shows in her recent study that is based on the analysis of interviews with 20 respondents in the Russian political elite, how Putin's establishment demonstrates loyalty to the regime amidst the war precisely because breaking this loyalty manifests a terrible transgression of "red lines". The sociologist identified similar to *adekvatnost'* traits of reasoning and innovation that keep individuals and organisations active and shielded from internal repressions. Aleksandra Prokopenko, *From Sovereigns to Servants: How The War Against Ukraine Reshaped Russia's Elite*. (London: Hurst, 2026).

who have mastered the art of knowing precisely how far one can go, and when to stop. This article uses the career of Prigozhin as a dramatic parable of this skill – first in its masterful, hyper-aware application, and later in its inversion, when *adekvatnost'* turned inward and became self-referential. In his final years, Prigozhin no longer sought to read the regime's cues but to embody what he claimed as the nation's authentic will against a corrupt elite. His mutiny, therefore, did not represent a collapse of *adekvatnost'* but its ultimate, hyperbolic extension: an attempt to act “adequately” in a system that had ceased to offer any intelligible signals.

3 Methodology

This study examines the evolution of Prigozhin as a media oligarch in late Putin's Russia using a critical case study design in Flyvbjerg's combined with historically grounded, process-oriented analysis rather than formal causal process tracing.⁴⁰ Prigozhin's career serves as a critical case not in the narrow positivist sense of a decisive test, but offers an extreme, paradigmatic example through which the theoretical concept of *adekvatnost'* – the intuitive ability to navigate shifting political “red lines” in authoritarian systems – can be refined and extended beyond its original domain.⁴¹ His trajectory provides a rich empirical basis for this inquiry, illustrating not only a heightened form of political adaptability, but also its subsequent erosion and ultimate failure.

The methodological design integrates political science and historical enquiry to capture the interplay between Prigozhin's media operations, his position within Russia's elite networks, and the evolving constraints of the authoritarian system. Instead of isolating specific causal variables, the analysis traces key turning points and contextual dynamics, following a processual logic to show how Prigozhin's individual agency evolved in interaction with the changing institutional environment over time.

The study's empirical foundation is drawn exclusively from secondary sources, including domestic and international investigative journalism, peer-reviewed academic publications, policy reports, and official documents. All publicly available materials on Prigozhin were systematically reviewed, with

40 Bent Flyvbjerg, “Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research”, *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (2006): 219–245; David Collier, “Understanding Process Tracing,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011): 823–830.

41 Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (MIT Press, 2005).

sources prioritized for their established reputation. Where factual claims are disputed, they are noted as such. This analysis is also informed by insights from a broader, multi-year research project conducted by one of the authors on Prigozhin's media empire, which was based on a unique dataset of employee cvs, internal documents, and interviews with former employees. While this study does not conduct a new analysis of that primary data, its findings are incorporated to contextualize and corroborate the historical reconstruction.

A key part of the research design is a chronological narrative of Prigozhin's activities, constructed by triangulating multiple independent sources to resolve inconsistencies and identify turning points. We acknowledge that Prigozhin occupied a variety of roles over his lifetime including those of criminal, warlord and sportsman. However, systematically verifiable data on some phases of his early criminal activities remain limited in the public record.⁴² Our analysis therefore concentrates on domains for which robust documentary and textual evidence exists, particularly his media-related activities and public communications. The argument does not depend on treating him primarily as a media oligarch, but rather examines communicative practices observable in the available sources, while recognizing that his political effectiveness likely drew on the combination of his diverse experiences.

The article's analytical approach interweaves this historical reconstruction with a theoretical interpretation through the conceptual lens of *adekvatnost'*.⁴³ Rather than separating the empirical account from theoretical reflection, the narrative is continuously informed by the concept, situating the case within broader debates on the political economy of media in authoritarian regimes. This integrated and interpretive design aims not to test a causal theory, but to refine the concept of *adekvatnost'* by demonstrating its applicability in a novel context – tracing its movement from media practice to political behavior and assessing the limits of its explanatory power.

4 Results

4.1 *From Catering to Trolling*

In 2009, for the first time a private restaurant opened inside the House of Government. The officials downplayed the significance of the opening, claiming that a restaurant had always operated in the building and it was merely an

42 Østbø, "Strategic Transgressions": 183–207.

43 Elisabeth Schimpfoss and Ilya Yablokov "Post-socialist self-censorship: Russia, Hungary, Latvia". *European Journal of Communication*, 35 (2020): 29–45.

updated version of existing facilities. Representatives of Moscow's restaurant industry, however, suggested that the project was unlikely to be profit-driven. As one restaurateur remarked, such ventures serve primarily "image-making purposes," granting the owner a unique advantage in business negotiations. The restaurant was opened by Prigozhin, the restaurateur and the caterer of Kremlin's top bureaucrats.

By the end of the 2000s, Prigozhin's career trajectory exemplified Bourdieu's concept of social capital – the resources and advantages obtained through carefully fostered relationships and networks. By cultivating close ties with St. Petersburg's elite and leveraging these connections to expand his business, Prigozhin secured information, influence, and financial opportunities, positioning himself as a valuable asset within this circle. Notably, he often framed such ventures not as commercial pursuits but as acts of service to "our people," reinforcing his image as a loyal facilitator of elite interests.⁴⁴

Prigozhin launched his restaurant business with loans from criminal connections in St. Petersburg, expanding significantly throughout the 2000s.⁴⁵ A pivotal moment came in 2001 when he personally served Vladimir Putin during the dinner with the French President, an act that secured his proximity to power.⁴⁶ Thereafter, his catering company, Concord, became the go-to provider for high-profile Kremlin functions, including the prestigious St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. His political weight became undeniable in 2010 when he opened a large food factory to enter the lucrative Moscow school-supply market – an enterprise Putin personally visited, and a state-owned bank financed.⁴⁷

What was special about Prigozhin's catering companies was a developed media apparatus to intimidate political adversaries and run smear campaigns in St. Petersburg. By 2012–2013, he reportedly tasked his security team with "black PR" operations, such as staging fake food poisonings to sabotage rival

44 Maxim Glikin and Maksim Tovkailo, 'Chast' Doma pravitel'stva Rossii sdana v arendu pod restoran [Part of the Russian White House Leased for a Restaurant], *Vedomosti*, October 21, 2009, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2009/10/21/chast-doma-pravitelstva-rossii-sdana-v-arendu-pod-restoran>.

45 Andrey Zakharov, Katya Arenina, Ekaterina Reznikova, and Mikhail Rubin, 'Chef and Chief: Portrait of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Personal Sadist of the Russian President', *Проект.*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.proekt.media/en/portrait-en/evgeny-prigozhin/>; Roman Badanin and Mikhail Rubin, *Tsar sobstvennoy personoy: Kak Vladimir Putin obmanul vsekh nas* [*The Tsar in Propria Persona: How Vladimir Putin Fooled Us All*] (BAbook, 2025).

46 Barabanov and Korotkov, *Nash Biznes – Smert'*.

47 Anastasia Kirilenko, 'Kto Takoy Prigozhin? [Who Is Prigozhin?]', *Novaya Gazeta*, January 9, 2011, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2011/09/01/45715-cto-takoy-prigozhin>.

businesses and threatening critics of Putin.⁴⁸ While these activities served top politicians, they also demonstrated Prigozhin's proactive ability to leverage his own resources and test the limits of permissible action.

What Prigozhin sensed acutely – a clear indicator of *adekvatnost'* – was the Kremlin's need in suppressing the opposition and polarizing society. The political landscape shifted in September 2011, when Putin announced his intention to return to the presidency, and mass protests sparked across the country. Prigozhin co-produced the documentary *Anatomy of a Protest*, which used staged scenes to falsely accuse protesters of accepting payments.⁴⁹ He also launched *Gazeta o gazetakh*, an outlet dedicated to smear campaigns against independent media. It allegedly embedded agents within opposition newsrooms to gather compromising material and attempted to bribe staff.⁵⁰ Local journalists quickly exposed the outlet as a "black PR" operation, and it was shut down.⁵¹

One critical problem that the Kremlin had at the start of the 2010s is control of the online space.⁵² That space was distinctively anti-Kremlin.⁵³ Kremlin's envoys tried flooding the space with comments of supporters, but this did not work.⁵⁴ Prigozhin was clued by the then head of the political department of the Presidential administration Vyacheslav Volodin that pro-Kremlin bloggers were inefficient and costly. Prigozhin promised to build his own blogger

48 Denis Korotkov, 'Povar so Svoimi Tarakanami [A Chef and His Cockroaches],' *Novaya Gazeta*, August 11, 2018, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/11/08/78496-provokatsii-prigozhina>.

49 Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018): 152; Nikita Girin and Diana Khachatryan, "Anatomiya pro Testo [Anatomy About Dough]," *Novaya Gazeta*, September 4, 2012, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2012/04/08/49159-anatomiya-pro-testo>.

50 Anonymous, "Masha Khari. Kto shpionit v rossiiskikh smi [Mata Hari: Who Spies in Russian Media]," *Novaya Gazeta*, June 26, 2013, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2013/06/26/55249-kto-shpionit-v-rossiyskih-smi>; Korotkov, "Povar so Svoimi Tarakanami".

51 Fontanka.Ru, 'Posobie Dlya Provokatorov. «Gazeta o Gazetakh» Prodolzhaet Razoblacheniya [A Manual for Provocateurs: "Newspaper about Newspapers" Continues Exposés],' February 7, 2013, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2013/07/02/225/>; Anastasia Frolova, 'Gazeta o gazetakh': V poiskakh neulovimogo tirazha ["Newspaper about Newspapers": In Search of an Elusive Print Run], *Lenizdat*, February 7, 2013, <https://lenizdat.ru/articles/1113000/>.

52 Ilya Yablokov and Olga Solovyeva "ICT in Putin's Russia" in Graeme Gill ed. *Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2020): 364–376.

53 Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Kremlin's Wars on the Internet* (Perseus Books, 2017).

54 Andrey Loshak, 'Kristina Potupchik: «Nashi» ne byli troliami. Eto bylo pro devushki v golubyykh koftochkakh [Kristina Potupchik: "Nashi" Were Not Trolls. It Was About Girls in Blue Sweaters],' *Nastoyashchee vremya*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/potupchik-interview/30232662.html>.

network that would work perfectly and cost less.⁵⁵ Hence, the connections based on good relations and financial resources helped Prigozhin build the tool that will bring him the entry to the highest echelons of Russian politics.

4.2 *Troll Factories: Innovations in Media Business*

What would soon be identified by Russian investigative journalists as the “troll factory” represented a timely and effective tool designed amidst biggest protests: first in Russia in 2012 and then in Ukraine in 2013. The Kremlin’s loss to influence domestic Ukrainian politics required non-conventional measures. This marked the beginning of Russia’s systematic foreign interference strategy, where the distinction between external operations and domestic control increasingly collapsed into a single continuum of influence. First, hybrid warfare was launched that peaked in the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Second, the information warfare against both Ukrainian and Russian populations consisted of a chain of websites and social media communities that distributed pro-Kremlin disinformation about the war. Both provided a pivotal opportunity to expand Prigozhin’s business ventures and solidify his role as a key state contractor in the two spheres that would become crucial for his political rise – the IRA and the Wagner Group.

Indirect evidence suggests the Internet Research Agency (IRA) trialed its activities in St. Petersburg in late 2012. A February 2013 episode of Oleg Kuvaev’s popular cartoon *Masyanya* depicts a character getting a job at a secret office to become a social media “information troll”.⁵⁶ The staff and a statue in the office bear a visual resemblance to Prigozhin. Kuvaev, who had been a target of troll attacks, based the episode on his own research, which included speaking with an employee from the organization.⁵⁷

Prigozhin’s attitude to treat his media venture discretely has changed this time. Two investigative journalists in St. Petersburg independently joined Prigozhin’s organization as “trolls” in order to conduct their own investigation. Alexandra Garmazhapova (*Novaya Gazeta*) and Andrey Soshnikov (*Moy rayon*) ran their stories in the fall of 2013. The sudden revelation that Prigozhin – a famous restaurateur – stood behind the “troll factory”, as Garmazhapova coined it, played into Prigozhin’s hands and was used to propel

55 Zakharov et al., ‘Chef and Chief’.

56 Oleg Kuvaev, dir., *Masjanyya. Epizod 111. Trolleybus* [*Masjanyya. Episode 111. Trolleybus*] (2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LuyZ7ZdOow>.

57 Authors’ interview with Kuvaev.

his image of Kremlin's hand.⁵⁸ The next exposure of Prigozhin's activities by the major media outlet was a showcase of his intuitive skills of how to exploit the available resources for increasing his visibility and public influence – the clear signs of *adekvatnost'*.

When the *New York Times* picked this story, Prigozhin even showcased real-life trolling scenarios targeting Adrien Chen, thereby shaping the public image of the mysterious "troll farm" (as Chen called it).⁵⁹ Soshnikov and Garmazhapova admitted that they thought at the time that Prigozhin would shut down his business after it was discovered by the press.⁶⁰ However, the global fame was exactly what was needed to make the next step to influence – showcasing innovation and efficiency for the Kremlin's benefit.⁶¹

Prigozhin's media empire was focused on efficiency, with his primary innovation being the fusion of astroturfing – the creation of fake grass-roots support – with traditional journalism.⁶² His Internet Research Agency (IRA) quickly evolved into the Patriot Media Group (PMG), which effectively absorbed the "troll factory" and intentionally blurred the lines between trolling and formal media production.⁶³

The entire operation was metric-driven and described by employees as a "conveyor" (*konveer*) with high KPIs and constant shifts for both trolls and journalists.⁶⁴ This structure was managed by an analytical unit that used social media monitoring to generate tasks, while a strict internal security department maintained total control over staff through constant video surveillance and the use of polygraph interviews in conflict situations.⁶⁵ The organization was highly adaptive, analyzing each journalistic investigation about its activities to alter recruitment tactics and operational structures. They operated from different offices to obscure the link between its media brands and the "troll factory".

58 Aleksandra Garmazhapova, 'Gde Zhivut Trolli. I Kto Ikh Kormit [Where Do Trolls Live? And Who Feeds Them]', *Novaya Gazeta*, September 13, 2013, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2013/09/07/56253-gde-zhivut-trolli-i-kto-ih-kormit>.

59 Adrian Chen, 'The Agency', *Magazine. The New York Times*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>.

60 Interviews with authors.

61 Laruelle and Limonier "Beyond 'hybrid warfare'": 318–335.

62 Ahmed Al-Rawi and Anis Rahman, 'Manufacturing Rage: The Russian Internet Research Agency's Political Astroturfing on Social Media', *First Monday*, August 16, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i9.10801>; Marko Kovic, Adrian Rauchfleisch, Marc Sele, and Christian Caspar, 'Digital Astroturfing in Politics: Definition, Typology, and Countermeasures', *Studies in Communication Sciences* 18, no. 1 (2018): 69–85.

63 Poliakov, "Trolls Behind the Mask of Journalists": 416–428.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid; Korotkov, 'Povar so Svoimi Tarakanami'.

The PMG sought to build partnerships with state media, primarily to exchange links and improve search engine rankings. It worked to appear ideologically aligned with the state without being under its direct control – a rare example for the Russian media landscape where business or political actors are regularly involved in production.⁶⁶ A crucial asset was its symbiotic relationship with the Wagner Group. Prigozhin pioneered the use of war correspondents in Syria, Libya, and Donbas, a practice that became mainstream in Russian media after 2022.⁶⁷ These correspondents provided exclusive content for Prigozhin's media outlets while simultaneously building the Wagner Group's public profile. Besides, Prigozhin cultivated connections with the Ministry of Defense that at the time was also keen on promoting the war narratives and the image of efficient army.⁶⁸

The financing of Prigozhin's media empire is opaque. With no evidence of official state support or a conventional advertising revenue model, analysis suggests it functioned as a tool for accumulating political capital rather than generating profit.⁶⁹ While not directly state-funded, the empire was likely sustained by immense profits from inflated state contracts awarded to Prigozhin's other businesses. A similar model financed his mercenary activities; the Wagner Group was funded by vast profits from Ministry of Defense catering contracts that bypassed public tenders.⁷⁰ After the 2023 mutiny, Putin confirmed the state had spent over \$1.26 billion on Wagner through these contracts.⁷¹ It is highly probable that the media empire was financed through these same indirect and deniable channels. A major innovation was Prigozhin's cost-effective outsourcing of disinformation operations.⁷² He hired students and recent graduates for less money, capitalizing on the crisis in St. Petersburg's media economy after 2014, which created a large pool of humanities graduates seeking professional work.⁷³

66 Poliakoff, "Trolls Behind the Mask of Journalists": 416–428.

67 Ibid.

68 Barabanov and Korotkov, *Nash Biznes – Smert'*.

69 Poliakoff, "Trolls Behind the Mask of Journalists": 416–428.

70 Barabanov and Korotkov, *Nash Biznes – Smert'*.

71 Nataliia Demchenko, 'Putin Nazval Raskhody Byudzheta Na Soderzhanie ChVK "Vagner" [Putin Disclosed Budget Spending on Maintaining the Wagner PMC]', *RBC*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/06/2023/649adode9a7947730bb9b3ba>.

72 Renée DiResta, Shelby Grossman, and Alexandra Siegel, 'In-House Vs. Outsourced Trolls: How Digital Mercenaries Shape State Influence Strategies', *Political Communication* 39, no. 2 (2022): 222–53.

73 Poliakoff and Toepfl, "Prigozhin's Propaganda Team," 91–112.

His ultimate value to the Kremlin, however, was providing services that required "plausible deniability".⁷⁴ This allowed the state to maintain a position of official non-involvement – *nas tam net* ("we are not there") – in operations like election meddling, even as Prigozhin himself would later boast about them. In Russia's authoritarian environment, the menace of being targeted by his trolls was more effective than the fear of legal retribution. This dynamic reinforced the reputation of his "troll factories" and skyrocketed Prigozhin's own image as Putin's most dangerous and mysterious crony.

4.3 *Evil Chef: Cultivation of a Public Image*

International media attention on Prigozhin's election meddling and hybrid warfare activities cast him as a key Kremlin's weapon of the late 2010s.⁷⁵ Sensationalism and simplification by foreign media helped craft his image as "Putin's shadowy cook," which amplified the strategic ambiguity the Kremlin cultivated in its foreign policy – a tactic also used for outlets like RT.⁷⁶ This narrative projected Russia as a defiant, unpredictable power capable of disrupting Western hegemony through deniable means. By mirroring Putin's own media style, Prigozhin came to embody Russia's blend of hard (military) and soft (informational) power, becoming the unofficial face of its "little green men" strategy.

This arrangement was predicated on a mutually beneficial strategy of plausible deniability and ambiguity that worked for both political actors. This configuration exemplified *adekvatnost'* as a practical logic of anticipatory alignment: Prigozhin operated by intuiting the boundaries of what was desirable yet deniable, calibrating his visibility in accordance with signals from the Kremlin. When asked about Prigozhin, Putin would acknowledge their acquaintance but dismiss him as a "private person".⁷⁷ This official disavowal provided the state with the formal cover from potential international sanctions while allowing Prigozhin to operate with significant autonomy. This dynamic was central to Prigozhin's "win-win" business model; as long as he delivered the desired results for the state, the methods and financing of his operations were not scrutinized.

74 Østbø "Strategic Transgressions": 183–207.

75 Poliakoff and Toepfl, "Prigozhin's Propaganda Team," 91–112.

76 Stephen Hutchings, Vera Tolz, Precious Chatterje-Doody, Rhys Crilley, and Marie Gillespie, *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order: RT as Populist Pariah* (Cornell University Press, 2024).

77 Armin Wolf, dir., *Interview with Vladimir Putin* (ORF, April 6, 2018).

The 2018 indictment by the U.S. Department of Justice and the subsequent release of IRA content data by major Western social media platforms made the IRA famous worldwide, and its 2016 campaign targeting the US presidential election became the “most studied of the social media age”.⁷⁸ For Prigozhin, this represented a major increase in symbolic capital, to use Bourdieu’s concept as his danger and influence were acknowledged by the Kremlin’s major geopolitical rival, the US.⁷⁹ This was also the watershed where Prigozhin actively began building his political capital inside Russia. After the US indictment, he began a deliberate process to claim this capital for himself. He formally admitted being the head of the PMG, as the head of the board of trustees.⁸⁰

Prigozhin’s quest for greater political capital involved public spectacles – like displaying a banner at the White House and sending lookalikes abroad – and covert sabotage, such as a 2019 disinformation campaign against the late Alexei Navalny.⁸¹ He then produced a series of populist films glorifying his mercenary group, with his own name becoming increasingly prominent on the posters.⁸² This process culminated in a late 2021 film about the IRA which split his public persona into two characters: a heroic, defiant political mastermind and a jovial, bumbling patron.⁸³ The film’s PR campaign concluded with an extravagant “IRA Party” in St. Petersburg in December 2021, organized by his Concord group.⁸⁴ This event signaled that Prigozhin was no longer hiding

78 Ehrett et al. 021, p. 1595.

79 U.S. Department of Justice, ‘Grand Jury Indicts Thirteen Russian Individuals and Three Russian Companies for Scheme to Interfere in the United States Political System’, February 16, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/grand-jury-indicts-thirteen-russian-individuals-and-three-russian-companies-scheme-interfere>.

80 Marina Poliakoff, “Trolls Behind the Mask of Journalists”: 416–428.

81 Dul’neva, ‘Dvoynik Prigozhina, Feiki pro NATO, Tranzitnyi Shantazh: Informatsionnye Ataki Na Litvu s Rossiiskim Sledom [Prigozhin’s Double, NATO Fakes, Transit Blackmail: Information Attacks on Lithuania with a Russian Trace]’, *Novaya Gazeta Baltija*, June 7, 2023, <https://novayagazeta.ee/articles/2023/07/06/dvoynik-prigozhina-feiki-pro-nato-tranzitnyi-shantazh-informatsionnye-ataki-na-litvu-s-rossiiskim-sledom>; Matthew Luxmoore, ‘Navalny Ridicules Rumors He Met With “Putin’s Chef” In St. Petersburg’, *Russia. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/navalny-ridicules-rumors-he-met-with-putin-s-chef-in-st-petersburg/29751136.html>.

82 Liliia Iapparova, ‘Kak vyasnila “Meduza”, biznesmen Evgeniy Prigozhin prospansiroval s’emki fil’ma “Tunist” – o rossiyskikh voennykh v Afrike. V nem snyalis’ nastoyashchie naemniki iz ChVK “Vagner” [As Meduza Found, Businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin Financed the Film “Tourist” – About Russian Troops in Africa; Real Wagner Mercenaries Appeared in It]’, *Meduza*, May 19, 2021, <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/05/19/amerikantsy-za-demo-kratiyu-boryutsya-a-my-za-spravedlivost>.

83 Andrey Korshunov, dir., *16-y [16th]* (Aurum Production, 2021), 02:04:01.

84 Nikita Kovalskiy, ‘Детсадовский буфет, золотые горшки и море позитива: в Петербурге прошла IRA Party, посвященная фильму «16-й» [Kindergarten Buffet,

his connection to the "troll factory" and felt ready to claim a more prominent public role.

4.4 *The Inversion of Adekvatnost'*

For much of the 2010s, Prigozhin operated in a political and commercial grey zone, deliberately remaining an enigmatic figure with almost no public photos or videos.⁸⁵ His innovative media assets, combined with his reputation as a criminal sought by the US, catapulted him to the top of Russia's political influencers. At the same time, his business model required him to maintain friendly relations with various powerful state figures. He achieved this by giving expensive gifts to a long list of top elites, a crucial strategy for career advancement within an authoritarian environment governed by informal relations.⁸⁶

By the end of the 2010s, Prigozhin's value to the Kremlin began to erode as other powerful actors started replicating his models. The Kremlin's chief political operator, Sergey Kiriyenko, embedded organizations like ANO Dialog into state operations to handle social media monitoring and simulate public opinion, directly competing with services previously offered by Prigozhin. ANO Dialog launched an extensive network of social media communities and successfully lobbied for the "state public groups" law, giving it oversight of all government-sponsored social media.⁸⁷ With its vast state resources, ANO Dialog expanded across all Russian regions and took over complex information campaigns causing Prigozhin to lose out on state contracts. This state-backed competition ultimately diminished Prigozhin's status as a uniquely valuable media contractor.

In this context of escalating pressure, Prigozhin's sense of *adekvatnost'* began to lag behind the evolving logic of the regime. The intuitive skill that once kept him aligned with the Kremlin's unspoken expectations became increasingly outdated in a system that now rewarded bureaucratic predictability over

Golden Pots and a Sea of Positivity: IRA Party Dedicated to the Film "16th" Held in St. Petersburg], *Moskovskiy Komsomolets – Sankt-Peterburg*, December 16, 2021, <https://spb.mk.ru/social/2021/12/16/detsadovskiy-bufet-zolotye-gorshki-i-more-pozitiva-v-peterberge-proshla-ira-party-posvyashhennaya-filmu-16y.html>.

85 Greg Myre, "Putin's Chef" Has His Fingers In Many Pies, Critics Say', *World. NPR*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/30/685622639/putins-chef-has-his-fingers-in-many-pies-critics-say>.

86 Barabanov and Korotkov, *Nash Biznes – Smert'*; Alena V. Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernize?: Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

87 Poliakoff, S., Toepfl, F., & Kling, J. (2026). ANO Dialog: innovation in controlling Russia's digital information. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 42(1), 107–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2025.2559218>.

improvisation. He pivoted from a “mysterious chef” to a populist leader, using a personal Telegram channel for outbursts, supporting his own political candidates at elections, and openly conflicting with the Defense Ministry.⁸⁸ These moves reflected a residual form of *adekvatnost'* – a reliance on strategies of disruption and initiative that had previously guaranteed success but now clashed with the tightening boundaries of permissible behavior. This culminated in a public war with Saint Petersburg's governor, Alexander Beglov, after the latter blocked Prigozhin's political and business interests in the city. Prigozhin weaponized his media empire in a relentless negative campaign against the governor, which escalated to his lawyers formally accusing the Kremlin-appointed governor of leading an “organized criminal group” in letters sent to the FSB.⁸⁹ This unprecedented public attack demonstrated Prigozhin's new willingness to openly challenge the established system.

At the same time, Prigozhin was very sober when it came to his main information platforms: none of the criticism of the political establishment was published on any media outlets directly related to PMG. He published a few official op-eds about the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in RIA FAN, but later switched to informal communication platforms.⁹⁰

The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine catalyzed Prigozhin's transformation from a shadow operator into a public political figure, a process driven by his media empire. He publicly admitted to founding the “troll factory” and the Wagner Group, using a masterful media campaign to craft an image of himself as an authentic, front-line leader in stark contrast to the Ministry of Defense's seemingly ineffective generals. For a moment, the war restored his *adekvatnost'*: the regime once again demanded initiative, brutality, and performative loyalty – the very traits that had defined his earlier success. Initially, this populist appeal benefited the Kremlin. State propaganda co-opted his political capital, and his innovative solution of recruiting from prisons helped the government postpone a politically risky mass mobilization.⁹¹ A viral video

88 Liliia Iapparova, Andrey Pertsev, and Aleksei Slavin, ‘Grubo govorya, my nachali voynu [Roughly Speaking, We Started the War]’, *Meduza*, July 13, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/07/13/grubo-govorya-my-nachali-voynu>.

89 The Moscow Times, ‘Wagner Group Founder Steps Up Feud With St. Petersburg Governor’, *The Moscow Times*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/11/14/wagner-group-founder-steps-up-feud-with-st-petersburg-governor-a79369>.

90 Yevgeny Prigozhin, ‘Rossiya Vsegda Byla i Budet Protiv Natsizma [Russia Has Always Been and Will Always Be Against Nazism]’, *RIA FAN*, February 26, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220226163159/https://riafan.ru/1615846-evgenii-prigozhin-rossiya-vsegda-byla-i-budet-protiv-nacizma>.

91 Iapparova, Pertsev, and Slavin, ‘Grubo govorya, my nachali voynu’.

of his September 2022 recruitment speech to convicts, where he admitted his own past imprisonment, became a global sensation. Through this act, he temporarily re-synchronized with the system's new grammar of power, transforming wartime violence into political theatre. Yet this renewed *adekvatnost'* contained the seeds of its own undoing: the same performative mastery that made him indispensable would soon render him uncontrollable. However, by embracing this persona and proving he could deliver convincing speeches, Prigozhin reintroduced a volatile form of public politics, that previously was presented only by opposition politicians like Navalny. The moment he successfully claimed his own political capital marked the point where his trajectory within the elite system began its downhill slide.

In this final phase, Prigozhin's practice of *adekvatnost'* did not disappear; it was radicalized. Between spring 2022 and June 2023, he used his media resources to act as an alternative power center, repeatedly crossing the system's "red lines." Sensing that the regime was struggling to maintain credibility in a protracted war, he increasingly calibrated his behavior not to the Kremlin's muted signals but to what he framed as the expectations of "real" participants in the war – frontline soldiers and a betrayed public. He filled a visual vacuum left by Putin, constantly posting videos in camouflage from the front lines, positioning himself as the embodied presence of a war that the Commander-in-Chief largely experienced at a distance. Putin's first recorded visit to the temporary occupied Donbas – an unannounced nighttime trip to Mariupol in March 2023 – came only after Prigozhin's frontline campaigns had already redefined what public presence in war could mean.⁹² By inviting President Zelenskyy to meet him on the front line in December 2022, he presented himself more as Zelenskyy's counterpart than as Putin's subordinate, signaling that the reference point of *adekvatnost'* was shifting from loyalty to the leader towards a self-authorized claim to represent the nation.⁹³ As of time of writing (February 2026), Putin continues to avoid any direct meeting with President Zelenskyy, despite repeated diplomatic initiatives.

First major transgression was the publicized sledgehammer murder of a former Wagner convict, Yevgeniy Nuzhin in November 2022, where Prigozhin's

92 Reuters, 'Putin visits Russian-occupied Mariupol after ICC issues arrest warrant,' March 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-makes-surprise-trip-mariupol-first-occupied-donbas-ukraine-2023-03-19/>.

93 Anastasia Sheikina, 'Prigozhin Obratilsya k Prezidentu Zelenskomu v Bakhmute s Predlozheniem Vstrechatsya [Prigozhin Addressed President Zelensky in Bakhmut with a Proposal to Meet],' *Lenta.ru*, December 20, 2022, <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/12/20/meet/>.

own comments pointed to his direct involvement.⁹⁴ This act blurred the line between violence as an instrument of state power and violence as a personal performance. Unlike Putin's hidden system of retribution – where its fiercest critic Alexey Navalny is murdered in prison far from cameras and big cities – Prigozhin made violence visible and therefore political, transforming what had been a state monopoly into a public ritual of legitimacy.

The precedent of outrageous violence, even for Putin's Russia standards, showed that the void of official interpretation does not immediately make ultra violence acceptable inside the country even in the war context. Law enforcement services as well as the Kremlin were silent. Sergey Mironov, head of *A Just Russia party*, even took a picture with the sledgehammer that was gifted to him by Prigozhin.⁹⁵ War veterans criticized Prigozhin.⁹⁶

The episode demonstrated that Prigozhin's understanding of *adekvatnost'* had reached its extreme form: violence itself became a means of testing the system's red lines, probing how far one could go before silence turned into sanction. For years, Wagner's activities in Syria and Africa had been conducted in the shadows; violence there served the state but remained deniable. With the Nuzhin video, Prigozhin brought that violence home and on-stage, turning it into a symbol of his own authority. This was not a new act of killing, but a new way of owning it – a deliberate crossing of every remaining “red line” that separated the regime's invisible coercion from open military rule.

The case of Nuzhin is also significant in the fact that at the end of 2022 Prigozhin's media network was capable of reaching the audiences with the message not cleared by the Kremlin and striking enough in terms of content not to be seen but still have an impact on everyone who is interested in politics. Prigozhin once again, thanks to the potential of his media sources, put himself in the unique and maverick position in Russian politics.

94 Ramina Eshakzai, dir., *Otsidel 23 goda. Iz tyur'my na voynu i v plen. Kak rossiyskikh zekov verbuet 'Vagner'* [Served 23 Years. From Prison to War and Captivity: How Russian Convicts Are Recruited by 'Wagner'] (@Raminaeshakzai, 2022), 43:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciaZpSbg8oM>;

Elizaveta Fokht and Anastasiia Lotareva, “Tot, kto nam telo otdast, po-liubomu budet vinovnyi”: Istoriia zhizni i smerti Evgeniia Nuzhina, zabitogo kuvaldoi [“Whoever Returns the Body to Us Will Inevitably Be Guilty”: The Life and Death of Yevgeny Nuzhin, Beaten with a Sledgehammer], BBC News Russian, November 17, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-63656584>.

95 Kseniya Maksimova, ‘Lider “Spravedlivoy Rossii” Mironov Poluchil Kuvaldu v Podarok Ot Prigozhina [Leader of “A Just Russia” Mironov Received a Sledgehammer as a Gift from Prigozhin]’, *Gazeta.Ru*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2023/01/20/19531915.shtml>.

96 Fokht and Lotareva, “Tot, kto nam telo otdast ...”.

His transgressions escalated sharply. For New Year's 2023, Prigozhin aired an alternative address showing dead soldiers piled up at the back of his video, a stark contrast to Putin's official speech where multiple officers stood behind him, in a drastic show of support for the war cause. His criticism of military leadership moved beyond acceptable elite infighting, culminating in a May 2023 video where he asked, "What if Grandpa is a dickhead?";⁹⁷ using the Russian word *dedushka* ("Grandpa"). Although he did not specify who he was referring to, framing the remark in the context of ammunition shortages and battlefield failures, the term has well-established oppositional connotations in Russian political discourse. It was widely interpreted as a direct allusion to Putin,⁹⁸ although it could formally be read as directed at senior defense officials. In the speech's longer passage, Prigozhin contrasts hoarded munitions and bureaucratic complacency with the welfare of "our children and grandchildren,"⁹⁹ reframing his attack not as factional infighting but as a moral claim about the nation's future. By invoking responsibility before "our children and grandchildren," Prigozhin presented himself as the only actor able to safeguard the nation's future in wartime. This gesture marked a shift in *adekvatnost'*: he no longer responded to the Kremlin's cues but claimed the right to speak in the name of the people and their future.

4.5 *The June Mutiny and Sudden Death*

Stung by Russia's battlefield setbacks in autumn 2022, Prigozhin began using his Telegram channels to attack the Ministry of Defense. He amplified complaints of "shell hunger" throughout the winter, culminating in a February 2023 accusation of "high treason" against top officials – implying Shoigu and Gerasimov – for withholding munitions.¹⁰⁰

The feud peaked in a viral May 2023 video where Prigozhin stood over rows of Wagner corpses, roaring "Shoigu! Gerasimov! Where are the shells?" – a direct challenge to the state's authority.¹⁰¹ In response, the state required all

97 Telegram channel *Кенка Пригожина* (@Prigozhin_hat), post no. 3280, accessed via https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/3280.

98 Vitaliy Vasil'chenko, "Biden Is 10 Years Older, Yet It Is Putin Who Is Called 'Grandpa.' Why?" August 16, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/08/16/bayden-na-10-let-starshe-a-dedom-vse-ravno-nazyvayut-putina-no-pochemu>.

99 Telegram channel *Кенка Пригожина* (@Prigozhin_hat), post no. 3280, accessed via https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/3280.

100 Reuters, "Russian Mercenary Boss Accuses Top Army Brass of 'Treason', Moscow Pushes Back", *Europe*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/wagners-prigozhin-accuses-russian-top-brass-treason-2023-02-21/>.

101 Piotr Sauer, "Wagner Chief Rages at Russia's Generals and Threatens Bakhmut Pullout", *The Guardian*, May 5, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/05/wagner-chief-yevgeny-prigozhin-rages-at-russia-generals-and-threatens-bakhmut-pullout>.

mercenaries to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defense, a move that would strip Prigozhin of his manpower.

This escalating conflict reached its apex with the “March of Justice” in June 2023. The mutiny, during which Wagner forces occupied the military headquarters in Rostov-on-Don and marched towards Moscow, shook the regime and exposed the culmination of Prigozhin’s moral and political evolution. Many commentators interpreted this episode as the moment Prigozhin lost his sanity.¹⁰² In turn, our reading shows that within his own value system the mutiny was not irrational but the terminal stage of his redefined *adekvatnost’*. Having long ceased to read power’s signals, Prigozhin now sought the approval of the people he claimed to represent – the soldiers, the families of the dead, and the broader public disillusioned with the war’s course. In an interview with Ksenia Klochkova two years after Prigozhin’s death, his mother said that he had expected support from these people in return.¹⁰³ By naming his rebellion the “March of Justice,” he reframed *adekvatnost’* as moral accountability to these imagined constituencies rather than to the Kremlin. Justice, in this sense, meant restoring balance between those who fought and those who profited from the war.

One of the key ingredients of the mutiny was the media campaign operated through related Telegram channels, most crucially, Prigozhin’s personal channel, but the PMG played only a secondary and hesitant role in it. He began the mutiny by posting a 30-minute video accusing Russia’s leadership of starting the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on false pretenses and echoing opposition talking points.¹⁰⁴ This was followed by a video claiming a Wagner group camp was attacked by the regular army – a claim later debunked – after which he declared his “March of Justice.”¹⁰⁵ During the night of 23–24 June 2023, state television aired the first official reaction to the mutiny – a brief emergency bulletin focused entirely on the media campaign surrounding Prigozhin, its videos and statements. This response made clear that the authorities initially treated the uprising as an information crisis rather than a military one. The FSB immediately charged him with armed mutiny.

102 Badanin and Rubin, *Tsar sobstvennoy personoy*.

103 Ksenia Klochkova, “Violetta Prigozhina, I told him: ‘Zhenya, only the internet will support you,’” *Fontanka.ru*, 22 August 2025, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2025/08/22/75852263/>.

104 Press-sluzhba Prigozhina, dir., #1829: *Publikuem Pervuyu Chast’ Bol’shogo Interv’yu Evgeniya Prigozhina* [We Publish the First Part of a Long Interview with Yevgeny Prigozhin] (Telegram, 2023), https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1279.

105 Aleksei Korostelev, ‘Shef i povar. Chast’ 6. Fil’m o edinstvennom myatezhe v noveyshey istorii Rossii [Chef and the Cook. Part 6. A Film about the Only Mutiny in Russia’s Recent History], *Proekt.*, June 24, 2024, <https://www.proekt.media/film/posledstviya-metyazha-prigozhina/>.

Overnight, Wagner forces crossed from Ukraine and seized the military headquarters in Rostov-on-Don without resistance. The next morning, Putin addressed the nation, calling the rebellion "treason." In a significant move that highlighted the importance of his media operations, the FSB raided Prigozhin's headquarters and media companies.¹⁰⁶ His media outlets were immediately and completely banned inside Russia – a step the Kremlin had not taken even against its most critical opponents. Despite this, Wagner units advanced rapidly towards Moscow, downing several military aircraft.

With Wagner forces approximately 200km from the capital, the stand-off abruptly ended that evening. Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka mediated a deal in which Prigozhin agreed to turn his forces back to "avoid bloodshed".¹⁰⁷ The Kremlin dropped all charges in exchange for Prigozhin's exile to Belarus, ending the 36-hour insurrection. The decision to halt the march marked not the destruction but the restoration of the system's logic. In yielding, Prigozhin once again aligned himself – consciously or not – with the grammar of power he had momentarily defied. His return to negotiation revalidated the very rules his rebellion sought to expose as hollow. The mutiny ended not on the battlefield but in the reassertion of the regime's communicative control: Moscow proved that even defiance could be reabsorbed into the language of obedience. Two weeks later, Putin met with Prigozhin and Wagner commanders, where Prigozhin reportedly refused to give up control of his mercenary units.¹⁰⁸

Prigozhin then adopted a semi-secret routine, travelling between Belarus and Russia. He openly attended the Russia-Africa summit in late July, signaling his overseas operations were intact, and published one final video in August, reportedly from Africa. On August 23, his private jet crashed north of Moscow, killing him and his top commanders. *The Wall Street Journal* later reported the crash was an assassination ordered by Nikolai Patrushev, the head of Russia's Security Council and one of Putin's closest *siloviks*.¹⁰⁹

106 Barabanov and Korotkov, 2024.

107 Current Time TV, 'Lukashenko zaiavil, chto provyol peregovory s Prigozhinym ... "o nedopustimosti kroavoy boyni" [Lukashenka Said He Held Talks with Prigozhin ... "to Prevent a Bloody Massacre"]', June 24, 2023, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/lukashenko-prigozhin/32474169.html>.

108 Charter97, 'Putin: Mnogie "vagnerovtsy" kivali, a Prigozhin skazal "net" [Putin: Many "Wagnerites" Nodded, but Prigozhin Said "No"]', July 14, 2023, <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2023/7/14/555784/>.

109 Thomas Grove, Alan Cullison and Bojan Pancevski, 'How Putin's Right-Hand Man Took Out Prigozhin', *Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putin-patrushev-plan-prigozhin-assassination-428d5ed8>.

The burial of Prigozhin on 29 August 2023 served as a final demonstration of the Kremlin's approach to managing politically sensitive figures. While security forces conspicuously cordoned off prominent military cemeteries in St Petersburg, Prigozhin's actual funeral took place privately at the remote Porokhovskoye cemetery. This successfully averted the possibility of a public gathering or protests. The absence of state honors, the choice of a simple grave next to his father, and the minimal coverage on state television turned the event into a symbolic act of erasure. Prigozhin was written out of the narrative he once dominated, disappearing from the news cycle as abruptly as he had entered it. His death thus completed the system's re-stabilization: the field of *adekvatnost'* closed around itself again, restoring obedience and extinguishing the brief possibility of autonomous initiative within it.

5 Discussion

The media empire built by Prigozhin represents a unique phenomenon, fundamentally distinct from traditional state or private media holdings. Constructed from the ground up, its core objective was never journalistic quality but political influence of its founder – first for reward of the Kremlin, later against the Kremlin itself. Its construction around an astroturfing core became its defining feature, allowing for a potent combination of media power, influence operations, and military force.¹¹⁰ To enhance this influence, a central asset, the “RIA FAN” news agency, was deliberately named to echo the state-owned “RIA Novosti,” projecting an aura of official authority. This strategy reveals a core principle of Prigozhin's operations: the creation of a parallel, loyalist media structure that could function as a state asset without being formally part of the state bureaucracy, granting it flexibility and plausible deniability. Certainly, the link between Prigozhin and Putin is crucial in this context as the personal relationship provided Prigozhin with the necessary weight in the political system. However, this can't be the sole factor of Prigozhin's success.

This media machine was so perfectly aligned with Kremlin interests that it required no external control, yet it simultaneously empowered Prigozhin to build his own independent political capital. He thrived as a “trickster” figure, whose value to the system lay in his creative and ruthless ability to push

110 Poliakoff, “Trolls Behind the Mask of Journalists”: 416–428; James Rodgers and Alexander Lanoszka, “Russia's Rising Military and Communication Power: From Chechnya to Crimea,” *Media, War & Conflict* 16, no. 2 (2023): 135–152.

boundaries.¹¹¹ The ingenuity that spawned the "troll factory" and later manifested in the mass recruitment of prisoners for the war was a clear sign of *adekvatnost'* – the ability to improvise effectively under limited conditions. In both instances, Prigozhin operationalized brutal but effective solutions that the state itself was hesitant to implement directly and efficiently, trying to maintain a "respectable façade" to operate within the lines of the international law.¹¹² He showcased the form of projective agency that lets an actor imagine future scenarios and act on them in the present.¹¹³ He did not just serve the political system; he stress-tested its very foundations and pushed the lines whenever possible.

Prigozhin was a man of chaos, and chaotic situations were his element. Before the state developed its own institutionalized practices for hybrid warfare, he was invaluable. This is why, in the first year of the full-scale invasion, his methods were popular. As the Russian army suffered a series of humiliating defeats in 2022, only Prigozhin dared to voice public criticism of the military command, skillfully using the grim realities of the war to his advantage.¹¹⁴ However, as soon as the regime began to systematize its war effort, his disruptive style became a liability.

In the final stage of his career, Prigozhin evolved beyond being a mere amplifier of state propaganda and crude, informal military force. After gaining social and political capital as an "entrepreneur of influence", he became a free-lance political actor who used his media empire to wage public wars against his enemies, including established state institutions.¹¹⁵ While this evolution was noted by some scholars it went largely unnoticed in the West.¹¹⁶ His audacious trajectory from state contractor to rogue political principal with his own army and media megaphone is what makes his case so compelling. As in the

111 Agnes Horvath and Arpad Szakolczai, *The Political Sociology and Anthropology of Evil: Tricksterology* (Routledge, 2019).

112 Østbø, "Strategic Transgressions": 183–207.

113 Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, 'What Is Agency?', *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 962–1023.

114 Ellen Nakashima, John Hudson, and Paul Sonne, 'Mercenary Chief Vented to Putin over Ukraine War Bungling', *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/10/25/putin-insider-prigozhin-blasts-russian-generals-ukraine/>.

115 Laruelle and Limonier, "Beyond 'Hybrid Warfare'".

116 Larissa Doroshenko and Josephine Lukito, 'Trollfare: Russia's Disinformation Campaign During Military Conflict in Ukraine', *International Journal of Communication* 15 (October 2021): 4662–89; Vera Zvereva, 'State Propaganda and Popular Culture in the Russian-Speaking Internet', in *Freedom of Expression in Russia's New Mediasphere* (2020).

previous decade, he moved the lines of appropriateness hoping to benefit from his experience of the system and well-trained intuition.

However, the possession of *adekvatnost'* doesn't guarantee perpetual success, as the political environment of dictatorships is never static.¹¹⁷ Prigozhin's value plummeted once the Kremlin institutionalized its war effort and found more reliable providers for its services.¹¹⁸ Within this new, rule-bound architecture of digital authoritarianism, his personalized, chaotic methods were no longer needed.¹¹⁹ At this stage, his *adekvatnost'* did not collapse but turned outward: redirected from the Kremlin's expectations to what he perceived as the will of the soldiers and the betrayed public. In his own logic, attacking Putin and the system was not defection but the ultimate act of acting appropriately towards another political actor he imagined would have the power, the veterans, their families or ordinary Russians. He miscalculated as he thought his popularity in the media was enough to battle with the Kremlin. The swift shutdown of his media infrastructure on the day of the mutiny revealed his ultimate vulnerability and what the state considered his main source of power.

His media empire functioned as a proto-political power, and this set him on a collision course with the state that tolerated no political diversity.¹²⁰ Trapped by his own momentum, he faced a dilemma: to refrain from the "march of justice" would have meant the certain dissipation of his political capital. He made his bet and failed. Yet his decision to remain in Russia after the mutiny was not an act of blindness but, arguably, of misplaced confidence. Having spent his entire career navigating the system's informal rules, he assumed that even open defiance could be renegotiated within its logic. In this sense, his final miscalculation was the most systemic of all: he believed that the game he had mastered was still being played. At the same time, the trajectory traced in this article shows that the very conditions that once made his form of *adekvatnost'* effective had been disappearing well before the full-scale invasion.

As the Russian state moved towards a bureaucratized, tightly coordinated model of digital and organizational control, the political space for individual initiative, entrepreneurial action or autonomous interpretation of "red lines"

117 Johannes Gerschewski, 'The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes', in *Comparing Autocracies in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2014); Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*; Frye, *Weak Strongman*.

118 Poliakoff et al, "ANO Dialog": 107–130. Marten, "Whither Wagner?": 45–64.

119 Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese Models*, August 27, 2019, <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/3527460/exporting-digital-authoritarianism/4328250/>.

120 Václav Štětka and Sabina Mihelj, *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies* (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024).

narrowed to the point of closure. Figures who operated through improvisation and personalized authority no longer had a place in this environment. The system no longer required mavericks; it required predictable executors whose actions remained fully aligned with centrally sanctioned operations. In this institutional configuration, actors like Prigozhin were not only unnecessary but structurally incompatible.

As we track developments in Russian media in 2026, it becomes clear that authoritarian leaders are keen observers, learning both from their own experiences and from one another – as illustrated by the case of Prigozhin's mutiny.¹²¹ More importantly, the Kremlin is extending its control over potential mavericks who might seek to convert their frontline credibility into a political one. Recent restrictions on digital platforms, coupled with the introduction of the state-controlled Max messenger and a framework of sovereign GosDigital (state digital), disproportionately affect those who support the war effort but might not fully align with Kremlin directives.¹²² Should they attempt to dissent thus showing inability to sense the "red lines", the Kremlin is likely better prepared to pre-empt any new challenges to its authority.

121 Lingling Wei, "How China's Xi Purged His 'Big Brother' to Achieve Absolute Power," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2026, https://www.wsj.com/world/china/xi-purge-general-big-brother-4fc7a13d?mod=hp_lead_pos8.

122 Patrick Wintour, "Russian Crackdown on Telegram App Prompts Rare Criticism from Soldiers, Pro-War Bloggers and Officials," *The Guardian*, February 11, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/11/russian-crackdown-telegram-app-criticism-soldiers-pro-war-bloggers>.