

Give Kyiv better kit to fight Vladimir Putin's brutal thugs

[GREG SHERIDAN](#), The Australian, JUNE 27, 2023

All the civilised world hopes that the increasingly erratic rule of Vladimir Putin is coming to an end in Russia. It's very unclear who would replace him. That Yevgeny Prigozhin, the ultranationalist, ultra-violent leader of the Wagner mercenary group, should stage such a brazen rebellion against Putin shows that the dictator has lost a lot of control.

Like most dictators, Putin relies in part on a projection of machismo, power, authority and effectiveness. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has shown his spectacular strategic misjudgment, his staggering failure to understand the true capabilities and limits of his own military.

He also completely miscalculated the ability of Ukraine to fight back, as well as the resolve of the West to support Ukraine. If a dictator demonstrably can't get things done, he loses a huge amount of his mystique.

Prigozhin is an astonishingly brutal character. His utility to Putin was that, unlike the Russian army, he could get things done on the battlefield. His public rantings suggest he may be even more volatile and unstable than Putin. If his march towards Moscow was a calculated move to displace the Russian military leadership, it too failed utterly. It's unclear whether Prigozhin envisaged actually toppling Putin, or Putin staying in power but with Prigozhin as defence chief. At the time of writing, it's unclear even where Putin and Prigozhin actually are.

Putin has always run a pretty ramshackle government, ruthless in repression but with a decaying state capability. That's one of the reasons he turned increasingly to oligarchs and private and semi-private militias. Apart from Wagner, Putin's most effective fighters have been the Chechen militias maintained by semi-independent Chechen war lords. Like many dictators, Putin often ruled by casual decree. One thing he took seriously was his own paranoia. So his personal guard was always richly rewarded. Some of them subsequently became very wealthy. Putin liked to have a series of powerful

figures within Russia who were all totally dependent on him and more or less permanently at odds with each other.

He wanted his allies powerful enough to help him effectively, but not powerful enough to challenge him. All of them, no matter how senior, lived in perpetual fear that they would lose Putin's favour and be cast into powerlessness, poverty or even death.

Prigozhin's rebellion renders that system's limitations naked. It demonstrates the weakness, the brittleness, of such capricious rule. These regime death throes, if that's what they turn out to be, are not really uncommon towards the end of a long-term dictatorship. In a dictatorship, the ruler is powerful, the institutions weak. So if the leader missteps ...

This all has a long way to run. Anyone claiming they know how Russian politics will develop from here needs to consult a psychiatrist or confess to telling lies.

Two observations for Western politics suggest themselves. The first is that no one looks like bigger idiots than those figures on the right in most Western nations who convinced themselves Putin was a natural ally of the West, reliable, a force for stability who in some way stood for Western civilisation.

Putin's army in Ukraine has illegally invaded a sovereign neighbour whose sovereignty Russia in 1994 solemnly promised to honour. It has used rape as a weapon of war. It has intentionally attacked and killed thousands of civilians, not as an unavoidable side effect of a military objective but as an intentional act of policy. It has kidnapped hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Ukrainian children. Its forces have castrated some Ukrainian soldiers taken prisoner, both as an act of sexual humiliation and to prevent them from ever having children.

One of the most significant factors in this imbroglio is that Prigozhin himself called out Russia's war in Ukraine as being based entirely on lies. Neither Ukraine nor NATO ever threatened Russia, he said at the start of his rebellion. There was never any need, or any rational reason, for Russia to go to war in Ukraine.

Internally, Putin runs a vicious Stalinist regime of repression. The idea among the complete idiots on the lunar right that this regime is somehow a friend of the West, or of any version of Western civilisation, is beyond absurd. It's not only irrational, it's obscene.

But there are also failures on the centre left. The Albanese government offered an extremely anaemic pledge of support to Ukraine on Monday. The package is worth barely \$110m, if very generously valued. The centrepiece is 28 M113 armoured personnel carriers. These vehicles date back to the Vietnam War. They have of course been refurbished from time to time. But they offer so little protection that the Australian Defence Force did not even deploy them in Afghanistan or Iraq.

The Ukrainians wanted more Bushmasters or Hawkei vehicles. Anthony Albanese said the government asked the ADF for advice on what would be the best assistance they could give to Ukraine and this is what it came up with. I believe Albanese has been a solid Prime Minister on national security but this statement is nonsense for two reasons. One, though I have the greatest respect for the ADF, the Ukrainians know much better what they need and can best make use of.

Australia has pledged a further \$110 million in support to Ukraine, as Russia's illegal war enters its 16th month.

But two, and far more importantly, unlike say Britain, the Albanese government is forcing the ADF to cover the cost of anything given to Ukraine out of the existing defence budget. The Australian

Strategic Policy Institute has calculated that after taking account of inflation and foreign exchange movements, the Australian defence budget is taking a real cut of \$1.5bn starting next financial year.

We manufacture Hawkeis and Bushmasters. We could give them in substantial numbers to Ukraine and make more to replace them. Instead we are forcing Defence to give away its kit, meaning naturally that it will give only junk.

Insanely, inexplicably, beyond all reason, the government decided to waste billions of dollars buying 75 new Abrams tanks to replace our 59 old Abrams tanks. We have no use for either, having not deployed a tank anywhere since the Vietnam War. But certainly we have no conceivable use for the old tanks. We could surely give these away tomorrow. Of course, like much of our notional kit, they may be in wretched condition, which in reality we wouldn't like to expose.

In any event, as the 12th or 13th biggest economy in the world, and a nation profoundly dependent on the collective security of the US alliance system, we're not making a serious contribution to upholding the international rules-based order by helping Ukraine to defend itself.

These dramatic events in Russia show up flaws all over the place.