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Fireside Chat with **Christo Grozev**

Christo Grozev, Lead Russia Investigator, Bellingcat Productions

Moderator: Sharon Weinberger, National Security Editor, *The Wall Street Journal*

Sharon Weinberger

Good afternoon. It's a real pleasure to be here with Christo Grozev the lead researcher for Bellingcat. I think you've been delving into a lot of questions that journalists have been looking at and trying to answer for the past year or more particularly about Ukraine. I wanted to start off with asking you about something that's been at the top of people's minds, which is what is going on with Prigozhin? Richard Moore, the head of MI6, made some comments in a rare public speech and they're really quite colorful it was what did he say was that the Wagner boss was a trader at breakfast parking by supper a few days later invited for tea and talking about how difficult it was even for the intelligence world to make sense of it. What sense do you make from this?

Christo Grozev

I agree that it was unprecedented, but I don't think he wasn't predictable. And I personally have been on the record of predicting an attempt by Prigozhin to take power by force, or at least since the end of the of 2022. Actually, I must have been the only person who was yelling enjoy the day that promotion attempted the coup because I won to bet and I also thought that if he had succeeded, this might have been a sort of a transition into normalcy in Russia after he's deposed after we will take power but it didn't work out. It was inevitable because, first of all, because Prigozhin had been cheated out of this business. The Ministry of Defense had tried to take out and privatize Wagner to sort of steal Wagner before the war started. Then they had to bring it back to the table because they couldn't do without him but he had a grudge against them, and that lasted throughout the two years before the attempted coup. Then it was clear both from open source data but also from us talking to a lot of people within the Wagner organization, because you have to talk to the bad guys to understand what what's happening, that they felt that precaution is a much better suited head of a new Russia. than Putin was. So there was this pressure peer pressure on Prigozhin himself to actually do something about it. And he, he spoke out against the minister of defense, but people below him understood that to be an attack on Putin. So what happened on that day was, from my point of view, inevitable it was predictable. The way it ended was strange. And it just points to a deal a deal was made and a deal is usually made in Russia with both a carrot and a stick. Now the stick here is the interesting wildcard what could have happened to actually pressure Prigozhin into stopping something that looked like a something with at least a 50% chance of succeeding. And we heard from some intelligence sources that were leaked that there may have been pressure on the kids on the children of certain senior people at Wagner. So that will be the very traditional state that the Russian intelligence services with us, maybe a kidnapping of somebody at the top, maybe a friend of one of those, so so forth. And the carrot in this case was a better deal through Belarus. And this leads, probably to your question where is Prigozhin now because it is Belarus. There's

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no question. There's no question about it. We actually traced this phone pings to Belarus over the last couple of weeks. There was a clear attempt to mislead the public in that he moved to St. Petersburg. He sent a body double actually appearance at St, Petersburg where he did attend a tea with with the Kremlin. And that just all points to a weakness of Putin supposition because you can't declare somebody a traitor in the morning, as Richard Moore said, which is whistle dog whistle in Russia for pending assassination. Everybody expected him to be taken out before the end of the day, and a couple of days later to accept him for tea. That is just that puts precaution at a much stronger position and Putin at this point in time.

Sharon Weinberger

Let's return there was a great quote you had in an interview with Julia Yoffie a few months ago where he said the Russian government cannot afford to kill people for just being morons. Because otherwise they'll run out of people in the security services. Putin kills people that oppose in those people that betrayed him but not morons. So it goes on Prigozhin a moron or a traitor or a bit of both

Christo Grozev

No he's a traitor but the political capital that Prigozhin had accumulated before he went on this semi coup was such that Putin couldn't actually ignore it and couldn't have people assassinated he wanted to he desperately wanted to, but it was no longer possible why? Was it not possible a couple of days before the coup there was the sort of end of monthly Social polling of several of the Russian pollsters that show that put that precaution was clearly the number two most trusted politician he's not even a politician he He's ranked as the number two most trusted politician in Russia behind Putin. And he had his own people that supporting within the Ministry of Defense silently within the FSB, and within the population at large, so he can't easily take out somebody like that, but he's a traitor. He's not a a moron.

Sharon Weinberger

So what the the assertion we hear a lot in recent weeks is that the attempted mutiny whatever one wants to call it, weekend, putting in the eyes of the Russian people and the Russian elite. Do you agree with that? And how do we know that how do we measure what the elites are thinking or can you talk about that?

Christo Grozev

Well, first of all, it definitely we can putin, in front of the people the electorate, there's no question about that leave you so for the first time people come into the street factory cheers, somebody who opposed put it on that day, and who cheered somebody who put an ad called traitor. This is what we saw with the company. Wagner leaving Rostov, and then moving on to bellows. Now that clearly shows chose to a lack of empathy to Putin among the general population despite what they would answer in, in social polling, but within the elites, what this game is an idea of how feasible a change of power is, it just gives a sense of attainability of something that they want to do, but there was a prisoner's dilemma where nobody wants to be the first one to actually stand up and sort of metaphorically shoot the first shot. But this gave an idea that this is doable. And even without support and origination from the

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security services. It's doable, but what if it was supported by the FSB. So I think that's why putting this weekend because of this image of how it can be.

Sharon Weinberger

One of the things that I find so fascinating about the work you do is that the sources that you have access to and how you analyze that, you've talked about how you discovered a surge of panicky and midnight communications between the FSB, Gru and so on the night, June 22 23rd. It was I believe, a day before Prigogine launched his coup attempt. How can you talk about your methodology what you have access to to the extent you can and

Christo Grozev

how you know, I've spoken about something, the large part of the methodology which is that we are using Russia's corruption against itself Russian version, a corrupt, corrupt government to actually buy data from government officials that disclose and shed light on the wrongdoings of the government itself. And for as long as there's a dictatorship in place. I think I'm comfortable. We don't know that we're journalists this but I'm comfortable and I can justify every decision that night of data the preceding night of phone calls in the night of phone calls on the day of the of the night of the call was extremely enlightening because not only did it show that the Kremlin had an inkling that something was about to happen. But on the night of the call, it showed the top generals from the jury who whose job was to stop this instead of actually spending all of their time talking to colleagues and putting out this blog Wagner. Will it achieve generally charging more in Ukraine who has made 45 phone calls that night to his lover can an only like 11 to his colleagues, right? So it was almost like they were binge watching a Netflix show. And between episodes they were like hey, what do you think is going to happen next? That shows you how this interested or not interested at the top level they were in whatever outcome that could happen.

Sharon Weinberger

so they were just waiting to see what happens next episode. Yeah. How would how could it have gone down differently? I mean, what were some of the variables there?

Speaker 2

Well, I mean, I think if Prigozhin did prepare a bit more for this. I think he was forced into a corner because he found out that there was an assassination plot on him. So if you had prepared a bit more, he might have been able to convince more than the 7000 Wagnerites to join him on that particular convoy. I spoken to a few the ones who didn't join and they said, we're not sure he's not going to cut a deal with Putin halfway through this project. And that's why we're not going to join because we don't want to be left without a dry. So I think it could have gone differently if he had planted for at least a week as opposed to a couple of days. And it could have gone differently. Some of these people were calling their girlfriends at night and had actually taken a slightly more active role in supporting him, but it was possible for it to go differently.

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Sharon Weinberger

So what are the possible scenarios or outcomes that could happen now? So Prigogine is Belarus. Maybe a nice place to retire? What does he do from there?

Christo Grozev

Well, first of all, we have to understand that building in Belarus, and pledging to make the Belarusian army the second army in the world which he did today is strong signal, it actually makes domestic politics in Russia. It throws it in chaos, because what Putin hadn't planned for the 2024 elections barring a victory in Ukraine, which is now not on the horizon. He was planning to annex Belarus that will be the second best scenario for him. Right. This is no longer possible because Lukashenko acquired an army that will defend them from that and literally Prigogine yesterday said, we're here in Belarus, and we're going to prepare for future military action. Maybe in Ukraine maybe not, but we will defend Belarus if need to. Now that's a clear message that Putin can no longer easily it's an expellers so actually put in his left without a plan B for the 2024 election and that's not nothing.

Sharon Weinberger

Where will Prigogine at this point get the financial support he needs for his his mercenaries?

Christo Grozev

I believe that this is just a hypothesis that part of the better deal that he called from Lukashenko compared to the old deal is related to his work in Africa that will continue under the sovereign, sort of supportive Belarus instead of the sovereign support. Russia, but the cuts he's gonna get from the time of gold mining is going to be bigger than he had before from Russia.

Sharon Weinberger

Well, that raises an interesting question, because we've usually looked at Latin America and Africa as a as a lever for Russian influence. Does it now become a lever for Belarussian influence or just pure financials for promotion?

Christo Grozev

Well, it was always both it was always a money making thing and lab, rootless Lukashenko and his son, they've always had an ambition to actually have some influence in Africa as a sort of a little sort of conversation for fact that they're a tiny country with zero sovereignty versus Russia. So that is that is going to be something they will try to leverage in their relationship with Russia as well.

Sharon Weinberger

Well, I could ask endless questions, but I think there's probably a lot of people in the audience who have questions for you. So I want to take a few from the audience. We have 30 rows and one reason raising their hand there's a microphone Yes.

Audience question

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Oh, okay. Well thank you so much Laura. Haim from French TV. Do you have any information about jena hais was arrested in in January. He disappeared and that people are saying that he was extremely close to Prigogine. Do you think he's involved in the plot? And we know where he is at this moment.

Christo Grozev

We do not. We did contact his wife and his wife three days after the call told us that he still hasn't come back from work and she's still waiting. So I think that's the status of the moment it's it's a shortened your scat situation where he's either arrested or the rest of the that's will put in is actually incentivized to do he doesn't want to show that he's losing generals weaponry that he finds traitors in every room looks. So this ambiguity is quite strategic. He's not going to easily announce that he's been arrested.

Audience question

I think there's a question in the back there. Hi, just curious if you're purchasing information from sources, how are you ensuring that the information hasn't been manipulated in some way to drive an outcome?

Christo Grozev

We use the same approach as any traditional journalistic organization or I use that at least in my team, we make sure that we get at least the second data source from a completely unrelated origin. And ideally, we do that long longitudinally. So we try to find data that predates that in terms of leakage that something that has become leaked years ago before actually somebody has a vested interest in poisoning the data. And that should be consistent with what we get from the source at the moment. But of course, we start with the assumption that the data is poison. So first, we have to validate the data for ourselves before trusting it. It's part of the process.

Sharon Weinberger

I think towards the back there.

Audience question

Hi, Chridyo. Misha Glenny from the IWM inVienna. Christo i the Russian military appears to have improved since the counter offensive began both in terms of its defensive lines, but also the possibility we're hearing of an offensive a counter counter offensive in the north to what do you ascribe that apparent renewed coherence in Russian military strategy?

Christo Grozev

Mish that's a great question. Actually, this morning, I was talking to somebody with inside information on what's been reformed partly in the Russian army. And there are two things to say to this. One is that they borrowed part of the positive experience from Ukraine. They've on a lower level started using the principles of operational autonomy, which never existed in the Russian military doctrine before and they're trying to take responsibility they're trying to report truthfully upwards which never happened before. I'll give you a great anecdote. Of how it was before. So so this is one reason that they are

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actually much more autonomous on a regional basis than before, and they will be allowed to now this has the risk or the risk for Ukraine and for the rest of the world, that it may become institutionalized and from what I hear the top Putin and people around him are planning and actually replacement of Wagner with an in house decentralized, professionalized NATO type American type for one of them first brigade type, army that will be that institutionally, so I think that is the the most likely answer and just to give an example of how it goes before, we did a major investigation 2015 of the Mariel shelling by Russia in the first phase of this war, and we got access to about 10,000 intercepted phone calls of Russian soldiers on the ground. In the middle of night shelling Maria will Ukrainian territory and what we could see is that any failure any casualty on the Russian side was misreported incrementally and exponentially at every level of the reporting upwards. And in one particular case, somebody putting the grenade into the grain launcher backward and causing eight of the comrades to die. By the time you go to the Kremlin was reported as an Israeli drone stroke struck us. Yeah. And the thing about this 2018 drones were not even a thing. So that's what's now regularly changing.

Audience question

How would you rate the Ukrainians as practitioners of tactical deception, of tactical, tactical deception?

Christo Grozev

Again, the Ukrainians are great at that. They are also very decentralized and competitive. And this is this is playing a great, great service to them at this point, because they're able to compartmentalize their active measures on the frontline even from their colleagues and in a country where there's a lot of corruption, unfortunately, and a lot of penetration of Russian operators in the security services that's the only way for them to maintain through complete comprehensive comprehensive illicit possession. And competitiveness and they're great at that.

Audience question

Worry about how the Ukrainians are able to take advantage of the Prigozhin Wagner environment setback in war.

Christo Grozev

Well, I mean, they were they were going to actually take major advantage of that continuous longer. So they have all the plans to do it. And now, the only thing they can do is actually hope that there's a continued split and the motivation which which there isn't again, precaution disappearing for three weeks. Was bad for Ukraine. Now. He was preparing today and calls in calling the frontline disgrace for Russia. What's happening from a disgrace Russia. This is playing in Ukraine stance. So the more precaution speaks in the next few weeks, I think the better for the Ukrainian counter offensive.

Sharon Weinberger

And do you think you'll continue to speak

Christo Grozev

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He will continue to speak Yes.

Audience question

Thank you very much, Stephen Shapiro. The Atlantic Council sir your work is extraordinary. I'm just curious, how much of it needs the investigations into war crimes in Ukraine?

Christo Grozev

That's a great question. The traditional Bellingcat my colleagues, whom I had to kind of physically separate from because I'm now based in the United States, they continue to primarily work on justice and accountability and that is literally gathering evidence for crimes. This is a unique war. We've spoken about this battery of last year's Aspen Ideas so unique war because there's there's never been a war that produces so much open source find the available evidence on a daily basis of, among other things, workarounds. And this makes it impossible for law enforcement agencies themselves to harness enough researchers to actually gather that system, make it systematic and make it prosecutable and this is a place for an organization like Bellingcat, but many other NGOs, but like others have the advantage of having dealt with court. Court admissible evidence before and we know Valley cat knows where the pitfalls are of journalists gathering evidence and then solving it along the way. But many of us don't do that. Now we've trained the many others do the same. So I think we'll see a unprecedented number of prosecutions from this war relative to the number of war crimes just because there's more things that cannot be ignored by otherwise lazy law enforcement agencies.

Sharon Weinberger

We had a question over here.

Audience question

At Edward Luce from the Financial Times, Christo, could you talk a little bit about why you had to leave Vienna and the degree of sort of rational penetration of the Austrian security services?

Christo Grozev

Very simple answer and I would not like to elaborate more about I received alerts from several law enforcement agencies, including from the Austrian one that they can no longer ensure my safety in in Austria, or much of the continent in Europe. And I was advised to stay put in the United States where at least according to traditional sort of conventional wisdom, Russia is not likely to attack a journalist. And yeah, Austria is unfortunately, heavily penetrated by Russia and interest both to the judiciary, the security services, there's an actual open criminal case against two members, ex members of the domestic security agency of last year who was surveilling me, my family and more than 30 other people of interest of the Russia Russian security services. That tells you a lot.

Audience question

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Christ I'm a member of Ukraine parliament very simple question. Do you believe that Russia after the Ukrainian victory or end in the war can be democratized with new leadership with Yeltsin number two, or your personal opinion?

Christo Grozev

Personally, I have a very sort of cynical answer to the depth I think that cannot happen from the bottom up. That cannot happen from a grassroots perspective. But the elite, the moneyed elite, including their civics, which are paid by the moneyed elite. They have an interest in actually reverting to normalcy. They have an interest in being able to spend their money and they realize that the only way to achieve that is by Well, the same thing that happened with the mafia in the 90s in Russia, where they had to legitimize their their business and then became a quasi normal business people the same thing would happen the United States centuries before that the same thing can happen in Russia with the lead actually forcing the acceptable degree of democracy in Russia

Sharon Weinberger

actually have a corollary question for that the US strategy, particularly with the slew of sanctions at the beginning of the war was supposed to put pressure on oligarchs on the elite and seem to have in some ways failed to move the needle. Was there a different strategy was

Christo Grozev

no I didn't think that was the only strategy but the the follow up was not good because you were supposed to engage with the oligarchs at the same time and not be not keep kind of the high moral ground and say you should have talked to us before you should have bought the US they should have worked privately with the oligarchs while sanctioning them and see, here's a scenario where you actually can be the sanction. And that didn't happen. And And actually, the Kremlin use that strategically as well, because we're investigating one of these cases, but it seems the Kremlin instigated sanctioning one on the face oligarch by the European Union, because they would know that or they would expect that that would bring them back to the Lord to the sort of home right. So I think there was a bit of a problem with not following up on the sanctions.

Audience question

I've read that the West was very concerned about Prighozin's march on Moscow and Putin, that he would be much more destabilizing to the world and Putin and which led to the cell phone call reassuring Russia that we had nothing to do with it. Do you believe that theory?

Christo Grozev

Well, I mean, I believe that theory that this may have been the conclusion of analysts in Western intelligence services. I disagree with that. If that were true, I think that the shortcut to actually ending Putin's regime would have been through breaking the prisoner's dilemma within the elite. The elite were slow, the like they experienced something that you can call slow, slow boiling the frog. Gradually their lifestyle got incrementally worse, and they could move use their money or they could fly around

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different host Conservative Party parties in in London anymore. But it happened gradually, and they want to end this they wanted to postpone it but there again, they don't know who will take the initiative first. Recording and coming even for a month that would have broken that vicious cycle that would have been the trigger to break the prisoner's dilemma because they cannot tolerate a North Korea 2.1 scenario Russia. So I was seeing this big this terrible new cover precaution is very temporary. But of course it's a hypothesis. You can't it can't be short so I can understand the opposing view as well. And the

Audience question

Stuart Bernstein former ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark, and we have the ambassador here from Why haven't the sanctions been more effective? And I was told once moderated a panel with Michael Hayden with CIA and at ephram levy from Mossad and they said Putin was the richest man in the world. What do you know that?

Christo Grozev

Oh, I mean, I believe it is because a lot of the money he holds sway over and look at his name but not even your mark to him. They're earmark for something called the stability Fund, which means that every big Russian state owned or quasi state owned company had to contribute a certain percentage of their, especially their international revenue to that fun, so of course, because Putin has ceded control over the direction of how that money can be used. It is incomparable to any individual's wealth that can be accumulated them or even to a sovereign individual being in the Arab world, for example. So but I didn't I think the sanctions did work and the sanctions work to the extent that it cannot find more than a couple of oligarchs who actually are happy with the current situation. But but then being unhappy does not make a cool, that's the thing somebody needs to help them make a coup. And this could be the FSB, right? This could be also literally, somebody steer them, steering them in the direction of bribing the generals around Putin, who sold them the idea that the war is winnable within a week to now tell them oh, we've won the war. So let's just enter the war. So all of this is actually doable. We have the gateway of a multiverse where Russia is has six or seven possible scenarios in about six, six months. One scenario there is not possible is that couldn't be can be as strong. As he was a year ago. That is a question.

Sharon Weinberger

Just about out of time. So one last question. You talked about having to leave Europe. What would it take for you to feel safe being back in Europe with Putin have to be gone Is that

Christo Grozev

Yeah. And then, a certain time after that most passed before, the people that I've hurt in Russia who lost their jobs, because we outed them, no longer have jobs. So but it's doable. It's foreseeable

Sharon Weinberger

any predictions on Putin's tenure?

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Christo Grozev

Before the next elections?

Sharon Weinberger

Thank you so much. Thank you