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## From Ideas to Action: Yevgeniy Prigozhin, Wagner Group, and the Operationalization of Duginism

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## Introduction

Ideology is the way human beings navigate their mental environment of beliefs and values, a conceptual pathmaking that seeks to draw continuous roads across an often inconsistent and unwieldy reality. For intercultural scholars seeking to understand an actor from a place far away, ideology can act as a map to guide their thinking to best approximate how that actor sees their world. One way to interpret the recent developments of the Wagner Group is to examine how they perceive and respond to their ideological landscape. By making sense of how current Eurasianist theorists like Alexander Dugin perceive of Russia and the options available for its future, Yevgeniy Prigozhin's actions, from the formation of the Wagner Group in 2014 to his efforts to spread disinformation in Western elections, begin to form a consistent constellation of projects to unseat the United States from its role as "global hegemon." Through in-depth open-source analysis, we conclude that Yevgeniy Prigozhin is inseparably tied to Dugin's own circle, and Prigozhin's actions should be understood as an operationalization of Duginist thought.

But ideology on its own is a story without an audience. In order for an ideology to guide the actions of a group of people, the ideologue must find a receptive milieu to enable that ideology to shape the world around them. By charting the current heading of Eurasianist ideology in Russia, we argue that current events like the Ukrainian conflict are motivated by a uniquely contemporary construction of the ideology espoused by leading Russian thinkers like Alexander Dugin. This paper seeks to understand the role that Yevgeniy Prigozhin, as well as his Wagner Group, play in the major strands of ideological thought in Russia. We engage in a discussion of the core tenets of Duginist thought, after formulating the context for its arrival. Once a firm footing is established in the conceptual framework laid out by Duginist neo-Eurasianism, we observe the way the influence of this idea has taken hold of major players in Russia today, most notably in Prigozhin's sudden rise to power and establishment of his empire, as well as Konstantin Malofeev's growth of his media enterprise. Finally, we discuss the implications of the embedded nature of Dugin's neo-Eurasianism and *Fourth Political Theory* in Russian strategic and political thought.

## History and the Current Cast of Characters

Understanding the current landscape according to leading Russian thinkers like Dugin offers scholars and policymakers a starting point to help locate Russian current events along their perceived path of history. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a significant turning point in Russian history. In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, there was a period of political and economic chaos in Russia, with different groups vying for power and influence.

Modern Russian thought is a complex and diverse field, but there are several prominent figures whose ideas have had a significant impact on the country's political and ideological landscape. One of these figures is Alexander Dugin, who has been associated with a range of far-right and esoteric groups throughout his career. Dugin's early influences included fascist mysticism and the works of Rene Guenon and Julius Evola, and he was affiliated with core ideologues of the Spanish Thule Group (Shekhovtsov, 43). While he published a Russian-language version of a Spanish neo-Nazi journal in 1991, his later work focused more on cooperation with the European New Right and the creation of a "National Bolshevism" that elided fascism and totalitarian communism (Shekhovtsov, 45, Crone, 322). Dugin's ideas were influenced by his relationships with thinkers such as Jean Thiart, who was obsessed with the idea of creating a Euro-Soviet Empire from Vladivostok to Dublin (Shekhovtsov, 46, Crone, 324). While these relationships were largely unidirectional, with Dugin being influenced by the European New Right rather than the other way around, they reinforced his interest in National Bolshevism, geopolitics, conspiracy theories, and Integral Traditionalism (Shekhovtsov, 47-48).

On the Russian Right, there are also figures such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who advocates for the return of Russia's empire and proposes a "Last Dash to the South" to achieve stability (Shekhovtsov, 48, Umland, 35). In order to maintain civilizational stability, he advocates a Russian-controlled area from Turkey to Afghanistan, with Russian ports on the Indian Ocean. While he is an adherent of Holocaust denial and traditional National Socialist ideology (Kipp, 82), he has also proposed a new political union with the European Right to avoid war (Shekhovtsov, 49). He also led the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which by all accounts is a conservative and nationalist party (Shekhovtsov, 48, Kipp, 77). Sergey Glazyev is another figure on the Russian Right who has formed relationships with Lyndon LaRouche and is generally antisemitic, anti-Soviet, and anti-Orthodox (Shekhovtsov, 52, Åslund, 381).

While these thinkers are certainly influential, Alexander Dugin's ideas are the most valuable to understand due to their consistency with Russia's current strategic objectives. Rather than going simply South according to Zhirinovsky's plan, Russia should seek to reconstitute itself as the center of the "Eurasian civilization," which includes the territories that formerly belonged to the Soviet Union, as well as those home to Turkic and Caucasian peoples (Dugin, 131). This

ideological and strategic mimicry begs a deeper analysis of Duginist thought, and its implications today.

### **Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism and *The Fourth Political Theory***

In 1997, Alexander Dugin published *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia*, a synthesis of his thought into a geopolitical theory and a strategy for Russian revival. At the center of his analysis is the incompatibility of Western societies and societies like Russia. In sum, neo-Eurasianism sees an inherent conflict between societies of tradition, like Russia, and its “Atlanticist” rivals who are societies of individual liberties. According to the reading of Andrey Tolstoy and Edmund McCaffrey, this conflict arises because “Atlanticism, by prioritizing individual liberties above all else, dissolves social bonds and obligations and devalues cultural legacy, thus destroying the very fabric that allows traditional societies to exist (Tolstoy and McCaffrey, 26).” As an ideological framework, neo-Eurasianism explains the causes of current conflict as traditional societies resisting and often violently rejecting the imposed decomposition by Western forces, namely the United States.

*The Fourth Political Theory* presents itself as successor to the three prior ones of liberalism, fascism, and communism, and is defined in large part by multipolarity. If not the “unipolar” construction of our current world order dominated by the West, then the alternative, according to Dugin’s formulation, is a “multipolar” world defined by the coexistence of traditional and markedly non-Atlanticist centers of power, which Dugin envisions as Russia’s purpose in current world politics. By mobilizing the discontent suffered by traditional societies at the hands of the totalizing politics of individual freedom, the key strategy of *The Fourth Political Theory* is to destabilize Atlanticist countries themselves. In systematically undermining Atlanticist domination, Russia must pull the rug out from under the Atlanticist centers of power, Washington and London, while presenting a traditionalist and authoritarian alternative to those who exist under Western control. As political theorist Shahzada Rahim Abbas writes, “for the new world disorder, the United States must be forced to withdraw from the shores of South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, the Far East, and Africa by limiting its geopolitical influence across these regions (Abbas, 37).” Rather than politically liberalizing the rest of the world as the current Atlanticist project attempts to do, this strategy favors the systemic devolution of the world’s lesser developed countries to their traditional roots, allowing Russia to reassert their rivalrous role to the United States.

Dugin’s theories have serious strategic implications for the United States and the various institutions that see it as a leader. In this ideological framework, military alliances like NATO, economic institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, as well as political institutions like the United Nations are instruments of the Atlanticist aim to replace traditional societies with the

same overarching political structure, one that prioritizes political liberties and economic freedoms for the individual. To combat this, only Russia and its neo-Eurasian project stands in the way, using the Atlanticist project of political liberty against itself.

The project of multipolarity, the instrument by which neo-Eurasianism can supplant Atlanticism as the basis of international politics, rests on two major strategic objectives. First, regions outside of the strongholds of Atlanticism like Africa, Asia, and Latin America must be presented with an alternative to the United States' pro-democratic aid, so that they can begin to back away from democratic pledges. Second, as the central beacons of Atlanticism, Washington and London must be undermined from within, forcing these countries to choose between internal stability and external influence. By implementing these two strategic pillars of multipolarity, neo-Eurasianism can undo the last 30 years of Atlanticist domination. But this project is no longer a distant pipedream. Owing to the actions of significant players like Prigozhin and Malofeeva, multipolarity and the neo-Eurasian project has begun in earnest.

### **Interpolating Prigozhin's Role in Neo-Eurasianism**

Yevgeniy Prigozhin is a Russian oligarch who has managed to find himself among Putin's inner circle, winning shadowy government contracts for his business empire as well as situating himself as an enactor of Russia's strategic aims. He formed the Wagner Group in 2014, a mercenary group that has exchanged security services for lucrative mining contracts in Africa, and has earned a fearsome reputation for its brutality in Russia's invasion of Ukraine which expanded in February of 2022. He has also earned international notoriety for spreading disinformation in a variety of Western elections, sowing discontent with the liberal democratic status quo in some of liberalism's oldest bastions from Washington to London to Paris. With this understanding of the situation, Dugin illustrates how these actions gradually conform to the dual objectives of the emerging multipolar world order.

To initiate the first objective of stepping in as an alternative to Western support and the pledges to democratic reform that come with it, Prigozhin has used the Wagner Group to destabilize regions that were once on an uncertain path to democratization. For this objective, Wagner's activities in Africa are uniquely useful as testing grounds for the spreading of roots from which neo-Eurasianism can thrive. In Sudan, the Wagner Group has offered security assurances and military support to Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan, who leads a brutal campaign against pro-democratic uprisings (Wong, Crowley and Walsh, 2023). While Prigozhin profits from the lucrative gold contracts for his companies (Blazakis, Glick and Shepard, 2023), Russia benefits from a democratic backsliding in the region where plans have been made to construct a port on the Red Sea for Russian warships (Magdy, 2023). In the Central African Republic, a former Russian spy has been installed as the chief security officer, as Prigozhin exchanges diamonds for



more security services (Searcy, 2020). But in both Sudan and the Central African Republic, Prigozhin and Russian influence fuels all parties of the conflict. Russian money and influence flows into the hands of the authoritarian leaders, as well as the rebels that they fight. Neo-Eurasianism does not seek power through stability and empowerment, but merely to reduce these areas into a carefully coordinated chaos, a tactic that disillusiones all sides from the lofty promises of democracy and economic liberty.

Multipolarity cannot be achieved merely through the undermining of liberal institutions in emerging democracies, but through the disintegration of the same institutions in the homeland of Atlanticism. This coordinated tactic of chaos also links Prigozhin to his numerous efforts to undermine the elections process in established democracies in the West. Through the use of disinformation mills propagated through social media, Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency, as well as his other mass-communications outlets have sought to exacerbate political divisions in the United States and countries of Western Europe. To those unaware of these strategic goals, Prigozhin's disinformation campaign was inconsistent, supporting those on the American political left as well as the political right. But when chaos is the objective, these actions paint a far more consistent picture. One of the unifying elements across the political debate in 2016 was the retreat of American foreign policy. This topic, championed by populist candidates across the political spectrum, directly supports Dugin's project of neo-Eurasianism.

Without understanding the strategic objectives of neo-Eurasianism, the activities of Yevgeniy Prigozhin, from the prolonging of multiple conflicts across Africa that support Russian interests, to his efforts to undermine established democracies in the West, seem like short-sighted grabs at power by a wealthy businessman. But through the lens of implementing multipolarity for the service of establishing neo-Eurasianism, Prigozhin's activities are carefully aligned instruments for the rise of a new Russia which was spoken into action by the thought of Alexander Dugin. This alignment would be by far sufficient to interpolate Prigozhin into the constellation of Duginist thought. What follows is an open-source investigation that places these two men, Dugin, the esoteric philosopher, and Prigozhin, the man of action, in the same circles.

### **Darya Dugina and the Disinformation Connection**

Regardless of how well Prigozhin seems to conceptually follow the path laid for him by Dugin, Tolstoy's "causal nexus" between idea and event remains to be seen. By understanding the role that Darya Dugina played in the social network of these two men, we demonstrate that these men are far closer than kindred spirits from the same country. Darya Dugina, killed by Ukrainian operatives (likely targeting her father) on August 20th, 2022, was Alexander Dugin's daughter (Barnes et al, 2022). A vocal supporter of the war in Ukraine, as a political commentator, she formed her father's more mystical philosophies into the mainstream. From her role as chief

editor of one of Prigozhin's disinformation outlets to the attendants of her funeral, she forms the link between Dugin's idea and the event that is the formation of Russia's neo-Eurasian project.

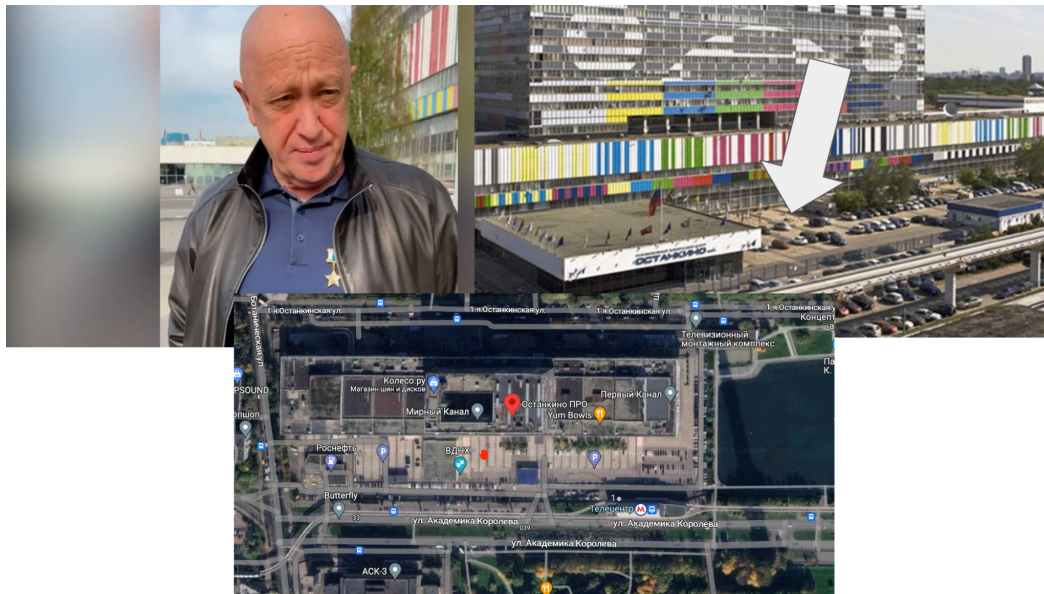
She is connected to Prigozhin, who empowered her as a primary actor in his disinformation campaigns. When Prigozhin-related companies were sanctioned by the United States (*United World International Sanction*), it was revealed that the chief editor of Prigozhin-owned mass-media outlet, United World International, was none other than Darya Dugina. She, in turn, empowered several other writers who are directly linked to Dugin and his theories. United World International's writing team, a group of 10 "experts," is rife with connections to Dugin and Duginist thought. For example, Fabrizio Verde discussed de-dollarization and multipolarity (Verde, 2023), which are ideas that align with Dugin's emphasis on multipolar world order. Similarly, Yunus Soner appears on the website geopolitika.ru (Soner, 2016), which is often associated with Duginist geopolitics. Moreover, Sinan Baykent also writes for geopolitika.ru and katehon.com (Baykent, 2016), where Dugin and Soner are frequent writers. In addition to these connections, Deniz Berktaý writes favorably about Dugin's Russian-based Eurasianism (Berktaý, August 2022) and proposes a Turkish-based Eurasianism (Berktaý, September 2022). Furthermore, Andre Vltchek and Dugin both signed a letter disavowing a finding that Iran is liable for deaths in the 9/11 attacks (Fars News, 2018), which indicates a significant level of ideological agreement. Finally, Ahmad Shahidov and Dugin attended NINTO together (*Symposium*), which is a symposium run by the Vatan Party, of which Soner used to be deputy chairman. The four other authors have only written extensively for the United World International website, so prior contacts could not be discerned. In other words, as a Prigozhin-owned company, the United World International sought to act as a mouthpiece for writers sympathetic to Dugin and his ideas.

Beyond this example of a Duginist mouthpiece, Darya Dugina's funeral brought together Prigozhin, Dugin, as well as the wealthy owner of the Tsargrad media group, Konstantin Malofeev. Malofeev is the founder of the Tsargrad thinktank, katechon.com, mentioned earlier. These connections are particularly important, as between Prigozhin and Malofeev, Duginism is not only a powerful ideology, but a well-funded and viral one. Both Prigozhin and Malofeev were depicted attending the farewell ceremony. Malofeev is depicted inside, near the portrait of Dugina and her open casket.





Prigozhin is also spotted outside, geolocated to the location of the farewell ceremony. He was also quoted by journalists, saying, “Dasha [Dugina] was the foundation stone of Russian greatness and the strength of Russia. And the fact that they tried to knock this stone out only made the foundation stronger (Sauer, 2022).”



Darya Dugina’s farewell ceremony brought together some of Russia’s most powerful voices on the Right, and revealed the extent of the connections between those with the ideas and the means to enact them.

## Conclusion

Ideas without the effort to bring them to being are nothing more than hopes for the future. With Alexander Dugin, however, ideas have boots on the ground with Prigozhin and Malofeev. Dugin's theories are rooted in a Eurasianist worldview that emphasizes Russia's unique cultural identity and seeks to reassert Russia's influence on the world stage. While Dugin's theories have been criticized for their mystical and quasi-fascist elements, they have found a receptive audience among those disillusioned with Western liberalism and the global order it has produced.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, a wealthy businessman with close ties to Putin, has been instrumental in promoting Dugin's ideas through his media and disinformation campaigns. Prior to her death, Prigozhin had employed Dugin's daughter, Darya Dugina, as a chief editor of one of his disinformation outlets, United World International, which has published articles by writers sympathetic to Dugin's theories. Darya Dugina also played a key role in mainstreaming her father's more mystical philosophies into the public discourse.

Darya Dugina's funeral brought together Prigozhin, Dugin, and the wealthy owner of the Tsargrad media group, Konstantin Malofeev, revealing the extent of the connections between those with the ideas and the means to enact them. Prigozhin and Malofeev's wealth and influence have helped to promote Dugin's ideas and to create a powerful network of like-minded individuals who are working to advance a neo-Eurasianist project that seeks to challenge the global order established by Western liberalism.

While it remains to be seen how successful this project will be in achieving its goals, it is clear that Dugin's ideas have found a receptive audience among those who are seeking an alternative to the current global order. The rise of neo-Eurasianism in Russia underscores the challenges faced by the liberal world order and the need for a more nuanced understanding of the geopolitical forces shaping our world today.

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