

# Rebellion In Russia

—By Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur, VSM (Retd.)

Usually, group discussion is the next level of test after the entrance examination to select candidates to pursue a higher-level professional course. In the case of recruitment, group discussion could be starting or at the end of the selection process depending upon the procedure adopted by the HR department of a company or an organisation. A group discussion implies exchanging of ideas between two or more than two persons. Normally, this is a face-to-face interaction to arrive at a decision or to collect more information on a subject. For the past few years, group discussion has also been effectively utilised to test the soft skills of the candidates and has now become a quick tool to shortlist candidates from a large number of applicants. When ten candidates arrived during the process of selection of managers in a PSU, they chose the above topic for discussion after they were given three options. On their arrival, they were allotted Identification Numbers, which were displayed on their shirts for everyone to see and were told to address each other by these Identification Numbers and NOT names. They were given a detailed briefing about the rules to be followed during the conduct of this GD and specifically told not to talk over each other and maintain discipline. They were also told to ensure that all candidates must be given an opportunity to express their views. Three assessors were detailed to conduct this GD and candidates were given 25-30 minutes to complete this group discussion.

Subsequently, the group discussion proceeded in the following manner:

**Candidate No. 8 :** Good morning, friends. How are you all this morning? The topic we have selected to discuss today is currently being discussed in almost all forums around the world. Let me start by saying that when the war in Ukraine has still been continuing for the last almost sixteen months now, Russia suddenly faced a rebellion on June 24, 2023, which shocked a large number of people in Russia and elsewhere. Most people described this uprising as the result of discontent over the ongoing conflict. It was shocking as people were under the not-so-correct impression that Mr. Vladimir Putin was dealing with



*Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur is a senior selector and trainer. He has worked as a selector at two Services Selection Boards and as Chief Instructor at Defence Institute of Psychological Research, New Delhi. He has conducted many interviews and group discussions during the last two decades and has authored four books, including two on Interviews and Group Discussions. He has received Vishisht Seva Medal awarded by the President of India and Commendation by the Chief of Air Staff.*

Russian affairs with a firm hand and was in full control of the situation over there. During the next half an hour or so, we are required to discuss, firstly, what circumstances led to this unsavoury development, which did sullen Mr. Putin's image a great deal; secondly, how did Russia deal with this new situation and, finally, what lies ahead for Russia now. I think with this background, you may now give your views to understand this much-talked-about development in Russia.

**Candidate No. 3 :** Thanks Number 8 for taking the initiative of introducing this topic. But, I feel to appreciate this new situation, we need to know some relevant historical developments which culminated in this rebellion. Can some friend throw some light on significant historical aspects of this development?

**Candidate No. 6 :** Yes, I can tell you about some historical developments in this regard. This rebellion, as we know, was the handiwork of the Wagner Group. This group is a Russian private military company that was founded in 2014 and is now also headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Subsequent to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Yevgeny Prigozhin and Wagner Group got increased influence in the military. So much so that, the estimated number of

Wagnerites grew from several thousand fighters in 2017-18 to about 50,000 fighters by January 2023, which was alarming. Interestingly, Yevgeny Prigozhin was a close confidant of Russian President Mr. Putin until he launched an alleged coup in June 2023. He controls companies such as the Wagner Group, a Russian state-backed mercenary group, operating most notably in Ukraine and Syria.

**Candidate No. 7 :** I think, Number 6 has provided us with very important information about the Wagner Group and its leader, who were primarily responsible for this military coup.

**Candidate No. 10 :** I would like to add that Prigozhin also controls three companies that were accused of interference in the 2016 and 2018 US elections. But, I am really wondering why did President Mr. Putin permit this Wagner Group to become so influential in the military affairs of Russia?

**Candidate No. 1 :** Yes, I can explain that by saying that the growth of the Wagner Group was mainly because of the fact that initial Russian plans to defeat Ukraine did not quite materialise. In fact, in the first few months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, its military suffered many casualties. Due to this reason, Russian leaders started recruiting mercenaries to fight for Russia. In this effort, Prigozhin was provided with many resources to meet requirements. He was able to recruit even prisoners into Wagner and it became a private army for Prigozhin.

**Candidate No. 8 :** Quite right. But with this new development and increased strength, the activities of Wagner Group were not liked by the Russian Ministry of Defence and the Russian General Staff and, therefore, Prigozhin started to criticise the Ministry of Defence and the Russian Federation. Soon cracks in their relationship started becoming visible and Prigozhin even alleged that the Russian military had attacked Wagner troops. So, that was the beginning of problems between the Wagner Group and the Russian military.

**Candidate No. 6 :** Meanwhile, Prigozhin also alleged that Russia's reasons for starting a war with Ukraine were lies and also Ukraine and NATO were not planning an attack on the



Donbas and Crimea in 2022. He further said that the Russian Minister of Defence was making Russia lose the war and the country was not using the correct tactics to fight the war against Ukraine. Subsequently, Prigozhin promised to take revenge on the Ministry of Defence.

**Candidate No. 10 :** But, I wanted to know how did the Russian military respond to all these serious allegations made by the Wagner Group?

**Candidate No. 1 :** Yes, after Prigozhin made all these allegations, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSS) lodged criminal cases against him. Thereafter, Prigozhin took his 25,000 soldiers out of Ukraine and into Rostov Oblast, Russia. He also severely warned that if anyone tried to come in their way, they would destroy everything. This amounted to open defiance by the Wagner Group and President Mr. Putin responded by calling Wagner's actions as "treason" and a "stab in the back" and that he would initiate severe action against those found guilty.

**Candidate No. 7 :** I think Number 6 and Number 1 have explained the developments prior to this rebellion quite adequately. Let us now talk about what happened thereafter.

**Candidate No. 8 :** Yes, during this revolt, Prigozhin suddenly seized control of Rostov-on-Don, one of the main cities in Russia's south and sent his fighters marching towards Moscow. This move was all the more stunning since Prigozhin, who was earlier a petty criminal and now turned head of a mercenary organisation, has been quietly used by Russia in hot spots in Africa and the Arab world and he owed his current position entirely to President Mr. Putin. Prigozhin took these drastic actions after considerable bickering with the Russian military's top bosses for some time. He was particularly critical of Russia's Defence Minister over the conduct of Russia's war with Ukraine. He asserted that his actions were aimed at effecting a change at the top of the defence establishment of Russia.

**Candidate No. 6 :** Let me add, during their march towards Moscow, the Wagner Group broke through several blockades on highways and warned people not to interfere. All these actions of the Wagner Group prompted President Mr. Putin to warn of the possibility of a civil war while he addressed the nation. The revolting soldiers continued their march till they were merely 200 kilometres from Moscow. Till this time, the situation

seemed really grave and it appeared Mr. Putin may have to face a big revolt, that too when Russia's war with Ukraine was still continuing unabated.

**Candidate No. 3 :** Well, by our discussion so far, we broadly know what developments took place during this rebellion. But, it would be interesting to know why Prigozhin turned so much against President Mr. Putin when not long ago, Mr. Putin was solely responsible for his dramatic rise in the Russian military affairs.

**Candidate No. 9 :** Yes, quite right. It is very relevant. Can some friend tell us about this aspect?

**Candidate No. 1 :** OK, I can talk about it. I think we have forgotten that the Wagner Group under Prigozhin had benefitted Russia a great deal in the ongoing war against Ukraine. The fact remains that it was this mercenary group that had captured the key regions of Soledar and Bakhmutin in Ukraine for Russia. In view of the Wagner Group's military contributions, Prigozhin enjoyed some influence and popularity. But meanwhile, he had developed huge differences of opinion with the top military brass of Russia for some time and became extremely critical of the strategy adopted by the Russian military to fight the ongoing war against Ukraine.

**Candidate No. 8 :** I would like to add that during this tussle between Prigozhin and the Russian military, Prigozhin developed a long-standing grouse against the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu and the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov. But, the crucial issue was that Russia's top military brass wanted to take control of all private military companies, which Prigozhin vehemently resisted. When Prigozhin eventually realised that he may not be able to resist this move, he decided to take this drastic step of launching a rebellion against the Russian military.

**Candidate No. 5 :** I think Number 1 and Number 8 have explained the reasons for this attempted revolt quite adequately.

**Candidate No. 6 :** Yes, quite right. In fact, when Prigozhin took over the southern headquarters in Rostov-on-Don after the rebellion, his first demand was that Shoigu and Gen. Gerasimov be handed over to him. He had also claimed on video that he was in control of the airport and the functioning of headquarters. Subsequently, he said that if this is not going to happen, he will go on a "march for justice" to Moscow and later, the revolting soldiers did proceed

towards Moscow in organised columns and they travelled within 200 kilometres of Moscow.

**Candidate No. 10 :** No, but I am still wondering how and why did Mr. Putin allow things to go this far that the revolting soldiers were able to proceed so close to the Russian capital, Moscow?

**Candidate No. 7 :** Yes, in this regard I would like to clarify that the reason why the revolting soldiers could reach that point without significant resistance seems to be the fact that all this while leadership in Moscow were hoping to resolve the situation without bloodshed. Meanwhile, efforts were being made to reach a compromise with the revolting soldiers, which eventually did provide a solution to this issue.

**Candidate No. 3 :** Can some friend tell us how ultimately this situation was brought under control?

**Candidate No. 1 :** Yes, I would like to apprise you of this aspect. As it has come to public domain now, Prigozhin has a long-standing friendship with Belarus President Mr. Alexander Lukashenko and they have known each other for many years. We know that the Republic of Belarus is in the centre of Europe and is a part of Eastern Europe. Belarus is also a close ally of Russia and has also supported the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Due to these reasons, a deal was struck with the help of Belarus President between Prigozhin and the Russian government to end this dangerous situation.

**Candidate No. 10 :** Can some friend tell us what are the details of this deal?

**Candidate No. 8 :** I think the details of this deal are not public yet, but what has been said by the spokesperson of the Russian President, and by Prigozhin, are now in the public domain. As per this information, Prigozhin's troops would go back to the barracks and Prigozhin himself would move to Belarus. Those in the Wagner Group who did not participate in the mutiny would be offered contracts with the Russian Defence Ministry. While all the others, keeping in mind their "heroic actions in the war" would be allowed to go home with no prosecution. Moreover, the criminal case instituted against Prigozhin for inciting an insurrection would also be withdrawn. These were the main features of this deal.

**Candidate No. 7 :** But, what happened to Prigozhin's main demands due to which all the trouble had started?

**Candidate No. 6 :** There is no mention of what happened to



Prigozhin's main demands of changing the Defence Minister and the Chief of Staff, although the spokesperson said that personnel changes were not part of the negotiations. But, actions taken by the Russian government in response to these demands are not in the public domain as yet. However, it is obvious that Mr. Putin has accepted an amnesty deal to halt the mutiny.

**Candidate No. 3 :** Friends, I think we should now talk about the significant repercussions consequent to this mutiny in Russia.

**Candidate No. 1 :** In this regard, I would like to say that this short Wagner mutiny did tarnish President Mr. Putin's aura of power. Historically speaking, one can say that the Russian rulers are known to be better feared than loved and I think, Mr. Putin has not been entirely different, though he has repeatedly talked of "the constitutional order" and legitimacy. This aura of power and authority of the Russian President was most certainly dented by this mutiny when an armed column of Wagner mercenaries marched towards Moscow. More so, in a country like Russia, where public criticism of the war can land a citizen in jail, this kind of mutiny by Prigozhin and his group has surprised everyone.

**Candidate No. 8 :** Yes, America was quick to respond by saying that this Russian turmoil shows cracks in Mr. Putin's leadership and it may take weeks or months to play out. This could aid Ukraine's counter-offensive against Russian forces within its territory while benefitting Russia's neighbours. At the same time, China and Russian diplomats had hurried discussions on the fallout of this sudden development.

**Candidate No. 3 :** I would like to add that some Russian citizens have also praised President Mr. Putin's leadership by saying that he was able to deftly handle this delicate situation and had avoided Russian bloodshed and civil war. In their opinion, after this turmoil, Mr. Putin has emerged to be a better and more competent leader of Russia.

**Candidate No. 4 :** Yes, that too is true. While the Russian war with Ukraine is still on, it was most essential to avoid this internal conflict and Mr. Putin has done it so efficiently. We must praise him for this. Don't you agree?

**Candidate No. 6 :** No, Mr. Putin did avert an all-out civil war, but he cannot escape the question of why he could not prevent this feud in his security circle from escalating into such a humiliating crisis in full public view. President Mr. Putin looked all-powerful,

presiding over a huge but cohesive administration and expanding Russia's influence abroad. But, we are now seeing Mr. Putin's challenges at home are increasing manifold. Quite a few Russian people feel that Mr. Putin must end this war and should first put his house in order.

**Candidate No. 1 :** In this regard, some critics feel that Mr. Putin overlooked quite a few things before and during the ongoing war with Ukraine, which have harmed Russia a great deal. The main issue in this regard is the fact that when states nurture armed non-state actors, they take the risk of getting targeted by them only. In the present instance, Prigozhin and his Wagner force were very much Mr. Putin's creations and the state patronage to these non-state mercenaries did threaten the Russian state itself during this rebellion.

**Candidate No. 2 :** Yes, I agree. A similar thing has happened in Pakistan as they have been also nurturing non-state actors to create problems for India, much to India's annoyance for quite some time now.

**Candidate No. 8 :** Another issue I want to mention is the fact that Mr. Putin did make a number of strategic moves prior to invading Ukraine which helped him get support from home and also expand Russia's influence abroad. He neutralised Georgia through a short but powerful intervention in 2008. He took Crimea in 2014 without a fight and backed Russian-speaking Ukrainian rebels in the Donbas. In 2015, he sent troops to Syria and turned around the civil war. At home, there was no challenge to Mr. Putin's authority. Russia wanted a quick victory like it had in Georgia and Crimea, but it did not happen and this caused problems and differences of opinion among the top military brass. This rebellion suggested that the strains of unlimited war were haunting Mr. Putin and that something was going wrong in Mr. Putin's inner circle which eventually led to this rebellion.

**Candidate No. 9 :** Well friends, the time allotted to us for this discussion is over and we must close it now.

**Candidate No. 5 :** If you all agree, can we ask No. 1 to conclude?

**Candidate No. 4 :** Yes, No. 1 please conclude.

**Candidate No. 1 :** OK friends. We all had an extremely interesting as well as informative discussion on this currently hot international topic of Russian rebellion by the Wagner Group. While the war between Russia and

Ukraine is still continuing, this rebellion surprised the world. At the outset, we did make mention of some historical aspects of the formation of the Wagner Group and the acquired significance of its leader. Then we discussed in detail the main reasons for this rebellion and its impact on Russia. We came to understand how it adversely impacted Russia's powerful image and Mr. Putin's own reputation as a strong leader. We also brought out how Russian authorities effectively curbed this rebellion without any bloodshed, which had the potential of starting a civil war in Russia.

Thanks all friends, have a good day.

### **Critical Assessment of Candidates' Performance**

#### **Good : 1, 6 and 8**

*Looking at the overall performance of these three candidates, it becomes apparent that they had studied this topic fairly well, and therefore, could take part in this group discussion making a good impression on the three assessors. Right through the discussion, they provided relevant inputs to make this discussion interesting as well as informative. While they spoke, they also cooperated with other candidates and allowed them to express their opinions. They also spoke with clarity and adequate self-confidence. Thus, their contribution towards this group discussion is considered significant. Due to all these inputs, their performance has been assessed as "Good".*

#### **Average : 3, 7 and 10**

*These candidates also took part in the group discussion and made some contributions. They also provided directions to discuss some important aspects of this topic. While their effort was noted, they also revealed that they did not have much data or information to take this discussion much further. They need to appreciate that in a competitive group discussion like the present one, one has to show one's knowledge and teamwork to display that he is a better candidate. It appeared that though these candidates had the capability, they needed focused effort to prepare the topic comprehensively. Owing to these reasons, their performance has been rated as "Average".*

#### **Below the Average : 2, 4, 5 and 9**

*These candidates did not make much effort to contribute to this group discussion. It was clearly observed that they did not have much to say on this topic and merely marked their presence by either encouraging other candidates to speak or agreeing with what others were saying. Obviously, they had decided to come for this discussion without making much effort to gather essential information about this important current topic. Thus, their contribution towards this discussion has gone unnoticed. Due to all these reasons, their effort is assessed as "Below the Average".*

**CSR**