



American Expression E0206 Prigozhin

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Yevgeny Prigozhin, often referred to as "Putin's chef," is a Russian businessman and entrepreneur known for his close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Born in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) in 1961, Prigozhin led a colorful early life that included a stint in prison for fraud. However, his trajectory drastically changed when he entered the restaurant business in the 1990s.

Prigozhin's flagship restaurant, "New Island," located in Saint Petersburg, gained significant popularity. It's here he reportedly met Putin, and their acquaintance blossomed into a partnership that extended beyond culinary pursuits.

Prigozhin is believed to have used his newfound influence to venture into a variety of businesses, leveraging his proximity to power. His corporate empire, known collectively as the "Concord" group, spans several industries, including catering, food production, and construction. One of his most significant contracts was supplying meals to Moscow's public schools, a lucrative deal that greatly expanded his wealth.

His close relationship with Putin also led to involvement in more contentious areas. Prigozhin has been implicated in Russian "active measures" operations, including the notorious Internet Research Agency (IRA), often labeled a "troll factory." The IRA has been accused of interfering in the 2016 United States Presidential Election through a coordinated campaign of misinformation and discord-sowing social media posts. Prigozhin's alleged role in funding and controlling the IRA led to his indictment by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2018.

Another controversial aspect of Prigozhin's activities pertains to his alleged role in organizing and financing the Wagner Group, a private military company. Wagner has been implicated in multiple conflicts around the globe, including those in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and various parts of Africa. The group is notorious for its lack of transparency and alleged human rights abuses, and it's widely seen as a tool for Russia to extend its influence abroad without directly involving the Russian military.

On the international stage, Prigozhin is a contentious figure due to his alleged role in these activities. He has been sanctioned by the U.S., the European Union, and other entities for his involvement in the IRA and the Wagner Group. Despite these sanctions, Prigozhin continues to operate, underlining the challenges international authorities face in curbing the activities of such individuals.

In summary, Yevgeny Prigozhin is a complex figure whose trajectory from ex-convict to successful businessman to a central player in Russia's domestic and foreign policy underscores the intricate connections between business, politics, and power in contemporary Russia. While his restaurants may have provided the springboard for his rise, it is his activities outside the culinary world that have made him a globally recognized name.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. What does Yevgeny Prigozhin's rise from a restaurant owner to a figure implicated in global politics and alleged misconduct tell us about the relationship between business and politics in Russia?
2. The Internet Research Agency, allegedly backed by Prigozhin, is accused of spreading misinformation and influencing political sentiment. How should the international community address these types of operations? What measures could be effective in countering such cyber activities?
3. Considering the reported activities of the Wagner Group, how can international law be enforced or improved upon to manage the operations of private military companies, particularly those operating across borders?
4. Discuss the implications and effectiveness of the sanctions imposed on Prigozhin by various international entities. Have these sanctions achieved their goals, or do they represent a symbolic act?
5. Explore the ethical considerations surrounding Prigozhin's business empire, particularly in terms of the contracts with public institutions like schools. How should governments approach business relationships with individuals involved in contentious activities?