

FILTERLABS.AI

Assessment of Wagner Group Activities

June 24, 2023

(22:27 Moscow Time)

For most recent version: [https://filterlabs.ai/FILTERLABS_Analysis - Prigozhin_Insurrection.pdf](https://filterlabs.ai/FILTERLABS_Analysis_-_Prigozhin_Insurrection.pdf)

Executive Summary

On June 24, 2023, several rebellious units of the Wagner Group, a private military contractor (hereafter, “Wagner PMC”) took control of Russia's fifth-largest city, Rostov-on-Don, without a fight. Via messages on Telegram, the head of the Wagner PMC, Yevgeny Prigozhin, declared that this campaign was directed against Russian Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Gerasimov. According to reports and contacts in country, the Wagner PMC units advanced over 300 miles toward the capital, bypassing the cities of Voronezh and Lipetsk.

The Wagner PMC stopped short of Moscow (approximately 150 miles to the south) and in the afternoon and early evening hours entered negotiations with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. At 8:25pm Moscow time Prigozhin announced that the Wagner PMC is “coming back to their positions.” It seems, for the moment, that the rebellion had ended.

FilterLabs.AI analyzed online discourse to assess Russian attitudes toward the activities of the Wagner Group. FilterLabs analysis focused on geographies where the events unfolded: Southern Federal District, where Rostov is located; Central Federal District, where the Voronezh and Moscow are located; and Moscow City and Oblast itself.

FilterLabs analysis revealed that there was a coordinated campaign in the Kremlin-controlled news media against Prigozhin and the Wagner PMC. This is particularly evident in comparison with data from Social Media (VK, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Telegram groups, and popular forums). This is further supported by the fact that

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Shoigu largely remained out of the conversation, suggesting that the Kremlin wanted to keep the focus on Prigozhin.

Sentiment toward Prigozhin and the Wagner PMC dropped in the days leading up to the events. This was more pronounced in News Media, due to Kremlin propaganda campaigns, but it was also present in Social Media. This negativity toward Prigozhin is especially important in the context of Moscow. For Prigozhin's campaign to have worked, he would have needed to see high support in Moscow. This did not materialize, despite his own base of support and media campaigns.

FilterLabs analysts, who have closely followed the events, have yet to reach a definite conclusion on Prigozhin's aims or future plans. Suffice it to say, it remains to be seen what kind of relationship Prigozhin and the Wagner PMC will have with Putin and the armed forces.

Context

The last five decades have witnessed a few military insurrections, but the Wagner PMC rebellion differs in important respects. Prigozhin's private army was nurtured and raised by the Putin regime, which provided it with funding, weapons, and status. In November 2022, President Putin signed a decree legalizing conscripting convicts to serve in the army. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Prigozhin's rebellion would end in negotiations.

Troubles for Prigozhin and the Wagner PMC

The events of June 24, 2023 were not the first troubles for Prigozhin and the Wagner PMC. Two weeks ago analysis from FilterLabs.AI began to signal the possible problems facing the Wagner PMC. Until the end of May, the official and semi-official Russian media treated Prigozhin and his PMCs with respect; both the frequency of the references and their tone ensured that constant attention was paid to their service in Bakhmut.

In early June, the tone began to shift negatively, and the activities of Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief of Staff Gerasimov, in turn, received a more positive media assessment. On June 7, Prigozhin took a sharply negative stance on the Defense

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Ministry's demand that all private military companies "re-register" their personnel by signing direct contracts with soldiers and officers.

The Wagner PMC and its leader Prigozhin, however, have their own support base in Russia. Many of their supporters like the radical communication style of "Putin's chef," as Prigozhin is often referred to as. Similarly, The Wagner PMC's attack on Bakhmut is considered heroic by many of their supporters. As the Wagner PMC retreated from Rostov, they were applauded by the locals, who were also taking photographs and selfies with Wagner personnel (<https://t.me/tutina/3634> and <https://t.me/tutina/3632>).

Prigozhin's image as an outspoken and courageous warlord has been cultivated with the help of the informational activities of his media group Patriot. Patriot is a notoriously effective "troll army" that is outpacing the Internet Research Agency in some respects and has been very active in recent months. The critical statements Prigozhin made of Shoigu, Gerasimov, and their performance leading the invasion of Ukraine were amplified by the media group with amplification from various trolls.

Assessment of Russian Information Environment

Even before the Prigozhin rebellion, Russia's information environment was difficult to monitor for a number of reasons. There is de facto military censorship, widespread self-censorship by journalists and even private individuals - people are afraid that their statements might become grounds for repression. Most importantly, media channels are actively manipulated in the interests of the federal and regional authorities. In particular, as the highly informative Telegram channel Volya (<https://t.me/volyamedia>) suggests, a number of Putin's associates have supported Prigozhin and helped promote him since last fall. The Wagner PMC was seen by some key personnel as a means of strengthening the Ministry of Defense and Minister Shoigu.

Information manipulation becomes a critical problem especially in an emergency situation, which is now Prigozhin's rebellion. The federal media have received orders to report only and exclusively Kremlin news, and both television and internet sources avoid using Prigozhin's name; relatively independent outlets such as Kommersant (<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6067583>) and RBC (<https://www.rbc.ru/story/64960f789a7947264a5c12ce>) are cautiously covering the events, and mention Prigozhin, while strictly adhering to the vocabulary and wording used in Putin's address.

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In the European part of Russia, first of all in Moscow, Voronezh and Lipetsk regions, they are reporting problems with access to most of the information sites of Prigozhin's media group Patriot, as well as a significant slowdown in the Telegram messenger (which, as mentioned above, is a key communication channel of Prigozhin himself). Independent Telegram channels are filling the information vacuum, but many of them are uncritical of incoming news and often publish unreliable or manipulated information.

There are, therefore, clear challenges to understanding the opinions of Russians in light of this surprising challenge to Putin's system of power. But that is not to say there are no viable instruments for assessing public views on the events. Public polling and other survey instruments have long been unreliable sources of information. If they weren't, they would still not be appropriate for such fluid events, being unable to keep up with the speed with which Russian opinion is likely to be shifting in light of both the events and the complex informational space. The best source of information of Russian public opinion is through sentiment analysis of digital communications, including social media, Telegram groups, popular forums, and local news media.

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Russian Sentiment toward Prigozhin and Wagner PMC vs. Shoigu

Filter Labs has utilized sentiment analysis to track Russian opinion since the war broke out in late February 2022. Below you will find a series of charts that track Russian sentiment toward the Wagner PMC, Prigozhin and Shoigu in the Southern Federal District, Central Federal District and Moscow City and Oblast.

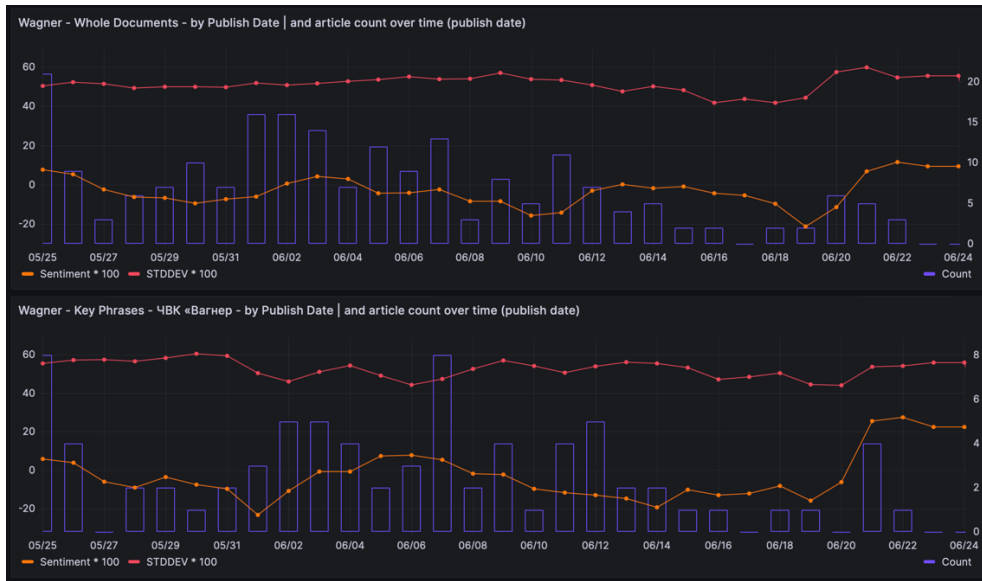
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Southern Federal District

Wagner PMC

In the Southern Federal District, mentions of the Wagner PMC on social media went sharply negative just prior to the break of the story, accompanied by a slight increase in Standard Deviation in socials (suggesting that there is a wider range of opinions). News Media, which is largely controlled by the Kremlin, seems to be doing the opposite.

Social Media



News Media

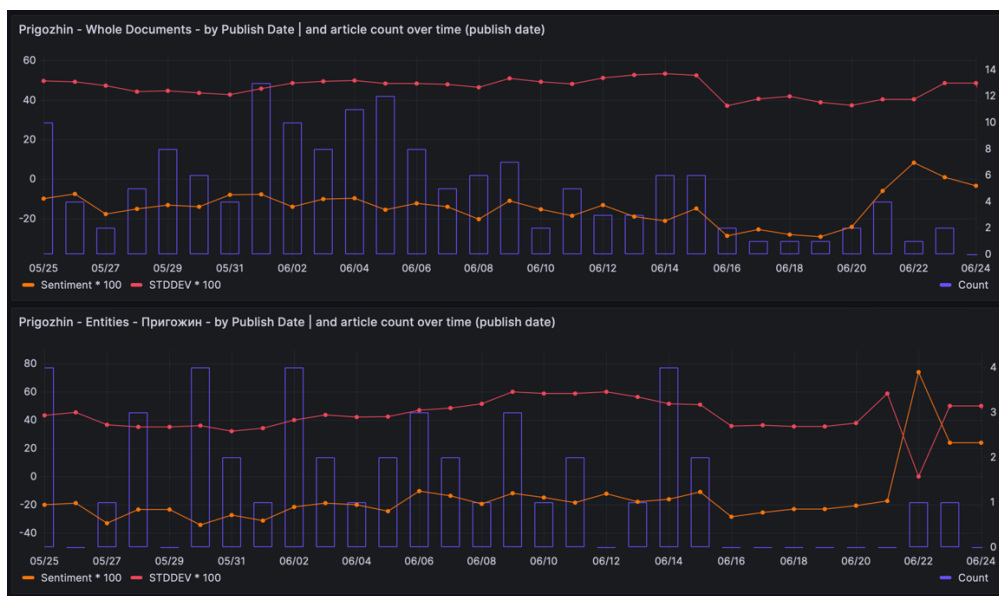


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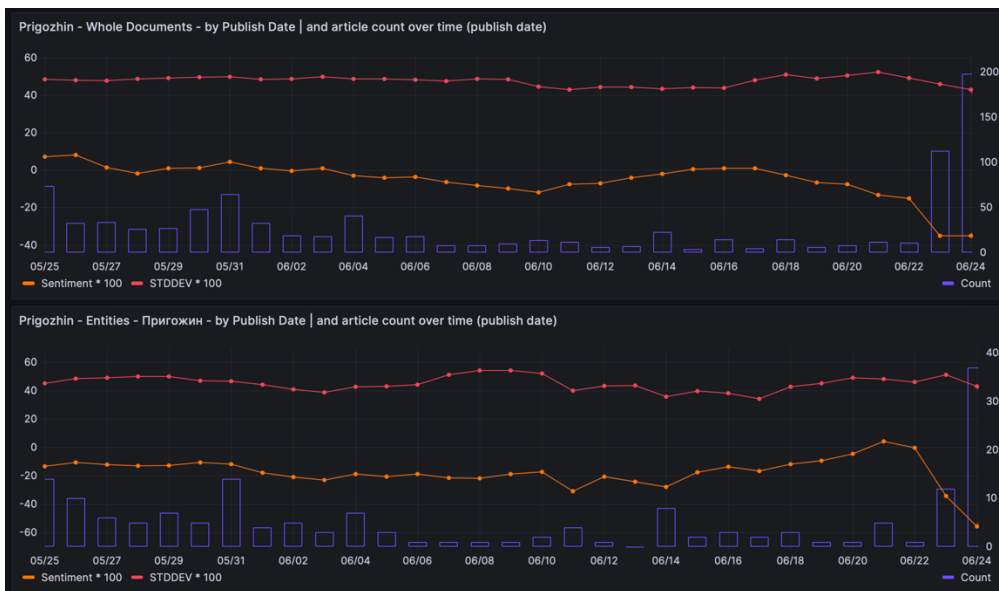
Prigozhin

Prigozhin's negatives are noticeably more pronounced in News Media as compared with Social Media, suggesting a cleavage between Kremlin propaganda and Russian attitudes.

Social Media



News Media



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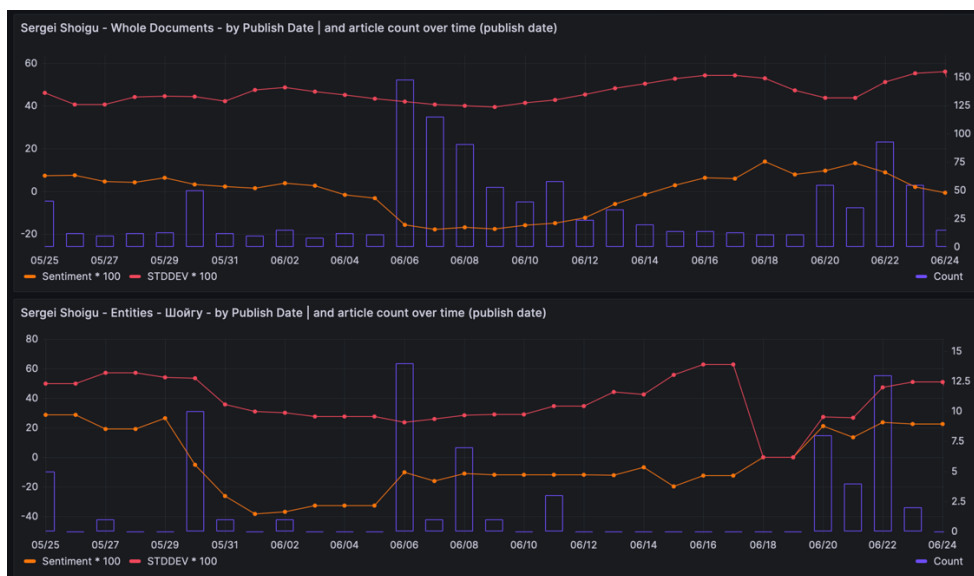
Shoigu

Attitudes toward Shoigu on Social Media and News Media look similar in the Southern Federal District.

Social Media



News Media



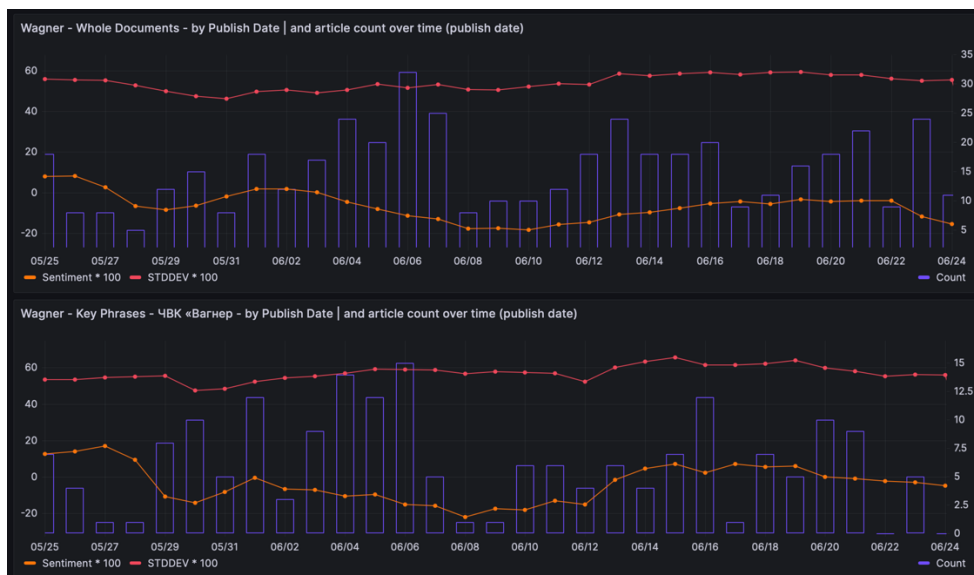
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Central Federal District

Wagner

General mentions of Wagner Group skyrocket primarily in News Media, where we see a sudden drop in sentiment, with a slight drop in standard deviation. A smaller standard deviation here suggests that there is a narrower range of views expressed about Wagner. This is an important signal because it suggests that the sentiment signal is not averaging out the extremes and thereby obscuring high polarization. Social Mentions are lower but holding steadier in Sentiment albeit with a smaller drop. Key Phrase mentions of Wagner Group are lower than general mentions, which means that Wagner is mentioned but is perhaps not caught by the processors as clearly.

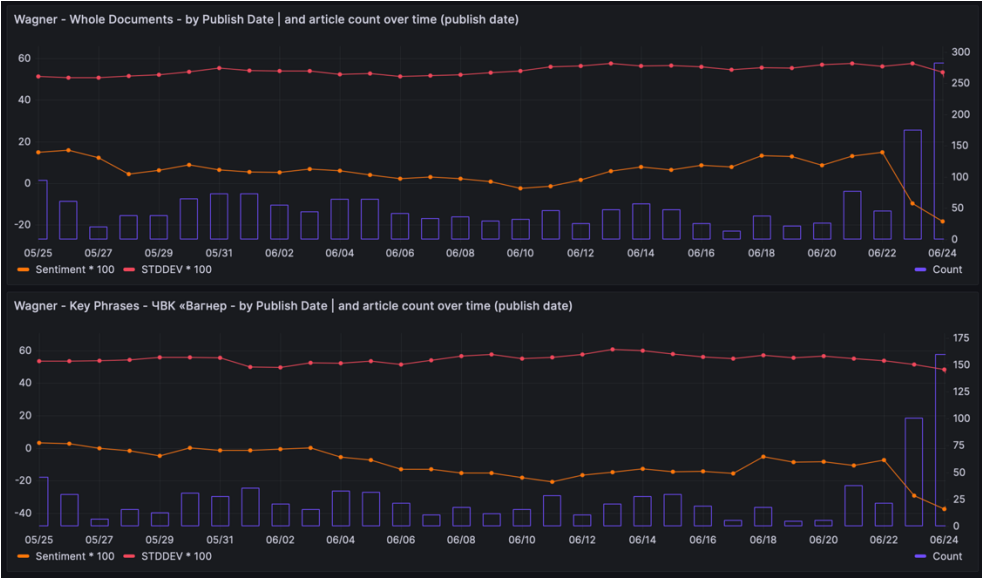
Social Media



(Top Chart is Whole Documents with Mentions, bottom is key phrases)

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News Media

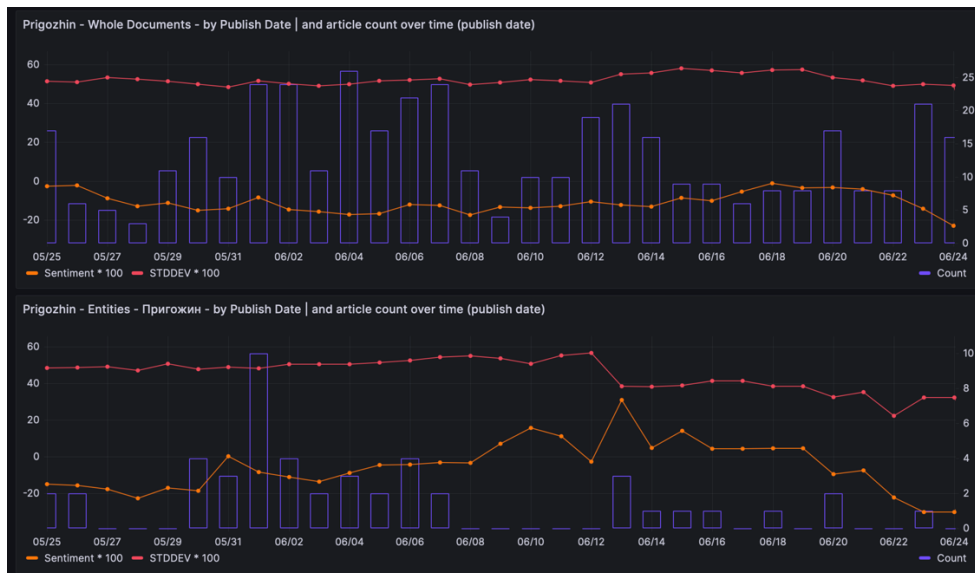


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Prigozhin

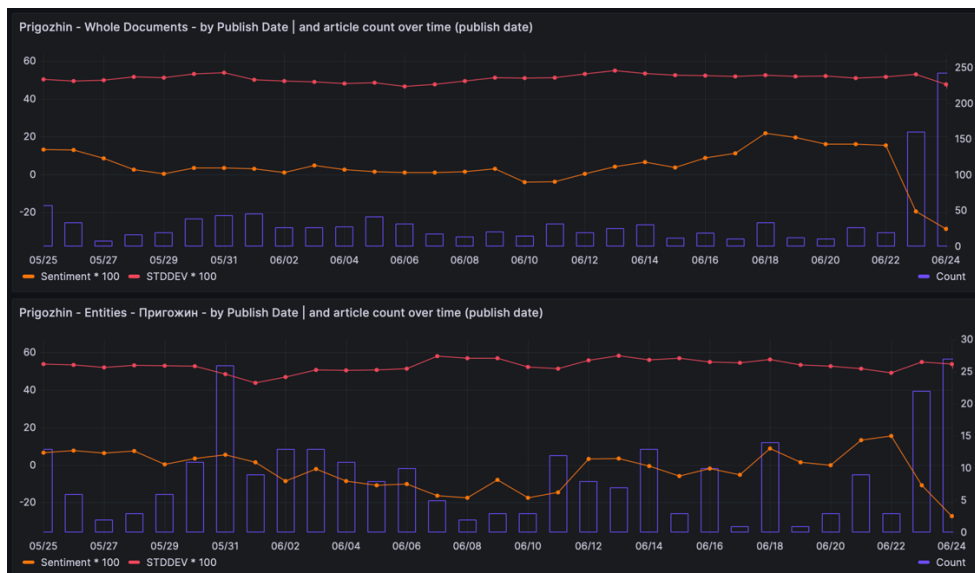
Relatively Similar pattern to Wagner, but with a slightly more pronounced negative sentiment in social media than Wagner had in social media.

Social Media



(Top Chart is Whole Documents with Mentions, bottom Entities)

News Media

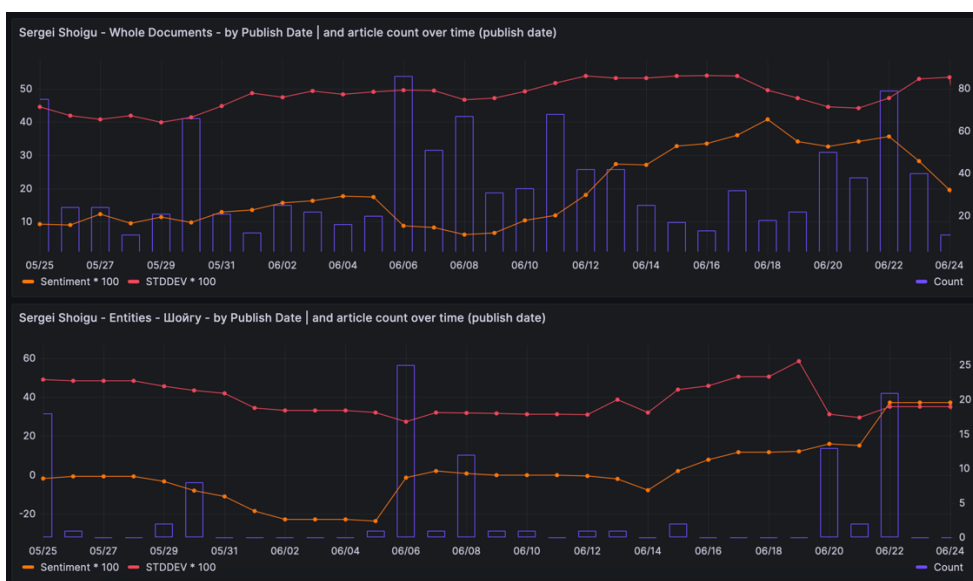


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Shoigu

Surprisingly, it looks like Shoigu is not a major part of this story over the past two days (strange as that may seem). Mentions of Shoigu are not spiking the way Prigozhin and Wagner group are. In News Media, we see an increase in standard deviation, which suggests that there is a wider range of views being expressed about Shoigu (i.e., both negative and positive). In social media, however, we see a decrease in standard deviation and a decrease in sentiment, which may indicate that while news media is taking a broader approach in reporting, the general social media environment is showing that people are trending negative in a more pronounced way.

News Media



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Social Media



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Moscow City and Oblast

Wagner

In News Media, the Wagner PMC is spiking in mentions while dropping in sentiment in both whole document (context) and in entities. At the same time standard deviation is decreasing, so this appears to be a coordinated campaign against Wagner. In Socials Wagner is also dropping in both Sentiment and standard deviation, but in a much less pronounced way.

Social Media



News Media



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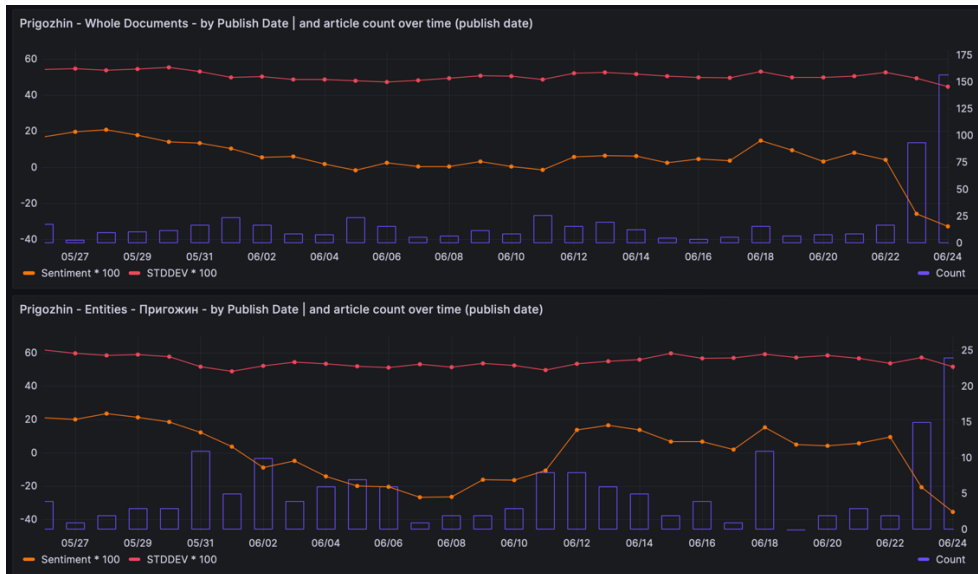
Prigozhin

Prigozhin looks similar in news to Wagner in news, but his entity metric is increasing very slightly in standard deviation over the past couple of days, suggesting that there are a wider range of views being expressed about Prigozhin himself.

Social Media



News Media

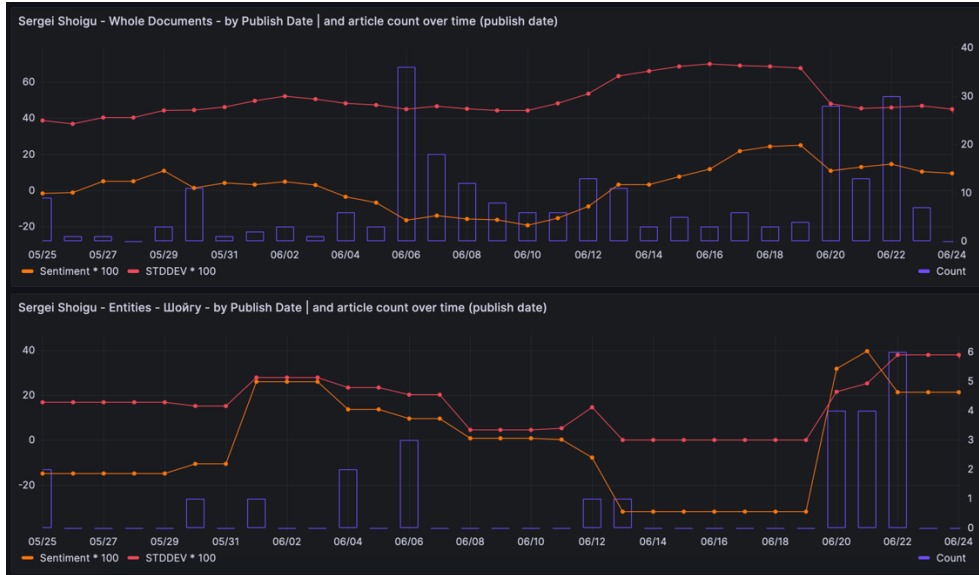


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Shoigu

Similar to other areas, Shoigu is managing to stay out of the conversation in News Media. He is seeing a modest increase in sentiment of entities, but not in whole document (context). However, in the context of Social Media Shoigu may be decreasing slightly in entity sentiment.

Social Media



News Media



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Edit History

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