





COMMENTARY


Why is COVID19 perhaps the biggest challenge Russia has faced since the collapse of Soviet Union?

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Background

The Russian government's response to COVID-19 has been one of contradictions and confusion. Yet to announce a nation-wide lockdown, President Vladimir Putin has shifted power, delegated decision making and averted public attention away from himself. Instead, regional leaders and governors have been left to tackle the crisis with new, temporary powers while central government effectively takes a back seat.

The number of COVID-19 cases in Russia now exceeds 100,000 with a relatively low mortality rate of just over 1,000 deaths.¹ The rapid spread of the virus is perhaps the biggest challenge Russia has faced in the post-soviet era. Concerns over public health, the economy as well as Putin's leadership have all been raised, drawing attention to some of the underlying fragilities in the Russian system.

Lockdown measures and their impact on Russia

The spring period should have been a triumphant one for Putin which would have seen a national vote on the 22nd of April 2020 to legitimise transformative constitutional reforms proposed back in January. COVID-19 has meant the postponement of this reform package, intended to create a "mega-presidency", giving Putin the power to fire judges from the supreme court, appoint lifetime members of the legislature and importantly, stay in power beyond 2024.²

Although the vote was never a legal requirement, it would have ensured the symbolic support needed to facilitate a smooth constitutional transition as well assert Putin's legitimacy. However, as the outfall from COVID-19 continues to pressure the economy and damage the regime's "social contract" with the people, gaining symbolic support for the reforms could be more difficult. This means alternative methods will need to be deployed in order to manufacture support, which will hurt Putin's legitimacy in the long term.

Initially, Russia was quick to act in reaction to the unfolding crisis in China and took a number of pre-emptive steps to defend against the virus. In January 2020, the virus was very much perceived as an external threat, thus Putin was eager to be seen as keeping the deadly foreign agent outside of Russian borders. By the end of the month, Russia had closed its border with China and created a "Coronavirus Headquarters" in order to manage the threat,³ although retrospectively, this perhaps created a false sense of security.

After complications over trade, price hikes and a very low number of reported cases the border was re-opened partially, with Putin downplaying the crisis, stating the situation was "generally under control" on the 17th of March.⁴ Russia also carried out large scale military exercises on the Ukrainian border, even after NATO had effectively cancelled "Exercise defender 20".⁵

Despite the number of cases remaining below 100 hundred for the following few weeks, the virus started to creep up on Russia and by the end of March 2020 there were over 1,000 reported cases.⁶ In contrast to the decisive action taken against the virus as an external threat, it had now become a domestic issue the resulting in a more lack-lustre response.

¹ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

² <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-president-life-weaker-1493314>

³ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/04/russias-confusing-covid-19-response/>

⁴ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/26/moscows-mayor-not-putin-is-leading-russias-coronavirus-fight-will-he-be-allowed-to-do-the-job-a69759>

⁵ <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/03/exercise-defender-20-coronavirus>

⁶ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

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At a time when Russia needed a national response from the Federal Centre, there was a slight retreat from action and lack of direction. This led to series of ‘recommendations’ throughout March 2020, including the closure of Schools from the 18th of March, the suspension of all chartered flights into Russia by the 27th March except for those bringing Russians home. On the 25th March 2020 a paid holiday was announced for a week, however Russian’s were only recommended to stay at home, resulting in many misreading the guidelines and leaving their home over a hot spring weekend.⁷ The paid leave has now been extended to the 11th of May as a “non-working period”, measures that have not been backed up by legislation.

Importantly, Putin had given the ultimate power to issue mandatory lockdowns to regional authorities, meaning responsibility for the strictest measures lay external to the Kremlin. This has resulted in several different responses across Russia’s vast regions. In Moscow, the epicentre of COVID-19 in Russia, Mayor Sergey Sobyenin, who also serves as the deputy head of the “Corona Virus Task Force”⁸ had warned Putin of the unfolding situation in Moscow, suggesting the low level of testing meant that “there are far more people who are infected”. Within a few days the most unprecedented measure in Russia’s Post-Soviet history was announced.

Sobyenin announced a full lockdown in Moscow on the 29th of March for all but essential workers and a small number of industries that continued to work, urging employers to allow people to work from home. This was followed by the swift introduction of high tech and increased physical monitoring, movement permits, as well as the QR code scheme for Muscovites.⁹ In addition, thousands of cameras fitted with facial recognition technology have been set up to help enforce social distancing measures,¹⁰ technology that exists in a number of West-European countries already.

The lockdown was initially met with confusion, fuelled by bureaucratic shortcomings resulting in some very unwanted consequences and misuse of resources. The digital pass scheme that was rolled out came under criticism as it led to huge queues in public transport as people lined up to have their passes checked meaning people were not social distancing. Furthermore, the thousands of cameras that were installed the cities at some cost have been described as inefficient and unnecessary as nearly every Muscovite that needs to, is sticking to the guidelines and observing social distancing guidelines.¹¹

The non-working period is however having a severe impact on the economy across Russia and the number of unemployed people is rising every day.¹² The aid given by the government is minimal and for those who no longer have an income lockdown measures are detrimental; an issue that is of course not exclusive to Russia.

In North Ossetia, protestors in Vladikavkaz have criticised the Head of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania leader Vyacheslav Bitarov for introducing “shelter at home” measures without a sufficient safety net for those who face life without an income.¹³ Currently, the government are pursuing a “anti-crisis” policy, meaning the sovereign wealth fund will be used to cover the deficit rather than acts as

⁷ <https://tass.com/politics/1139407>

⁸ <https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/03/24/moscow-s-mayor-warns-putin-that-regional-officials-don-t-understand-coronavirus-risks-and-says-low-levels-of-testing-could-explain-russia-s-small-number-of-confirmed-cases>

⁹ <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/04/10/moscow-announces-a-permit-system-to-regulate-movement-within-the-city-under-lockdown>

¹⁰ <https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2020/04/putin-projecting-strength-face-coronavirus-image-cracked/164790/>

¹¹ <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81581>

¹² <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/02/russia-economy-coronavirus-analysts-fear-economic-impact-russias-april-coronavirus-shutdown-catastrophic-a69851>

¹³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/with-little-government-support-some-russians-under-lockdown-are-resorting-to-protest---both-online-and-offline/30570735.html>

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a much needed injection into the economy. Measures to partially compensate salaries have been announced but will only be implanted towards the end of May, leaving many stranded. With thousands of businesses threatened, coupled with the price of oil crisis, economists are predicting the worst recession in Russia since the early 1990s.¹⁴

Russia's significant migrant population, many of whom travel from the Central Asian republics in search of work are facing a considerable challenge in the face of COVID-19. Many workers are now stuck in a transit limbo, without adequate access to health care, employment or in some cases housing. They are trapped in airports, crowded apartments and face legal issues as their working visas begin to expire.¹⁵ The financial situation also severely impacts the families of these workers who depend on economic remittances to survive.¹⁶

This is a challenge for the whole region and something the Eurasian Economic Union will have to resolve over the coming months as Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan will be hit hard by the crash in the price of Oil.¹⁷

Russia's Political System During a Pandemic

When we compare Putin's handling of the crisis to that of China, USA, or Russia's closest ally, Belarus, we can certainly argue that his approach has been more measured and perhaps proportionate to the scale of the virus in Russia. The epicentre in Moscow, has so far been effectively locked down and deaths have been kept low.

However, as the latest polling from the independent Levada Centre¹⁸ tells us, Russians are starting to notice Putin's uncharacteristic absence in juxtaposition to his recent bid to re-write the Russian constitution to increase his power. Even the Pro-Kremlin pollster VCIOM, has reported a 6-year low in Putin's ratings.¹⁹

The virus has been a significant test for Putin's crisis management skills and despite a clear capacity to lead from the top, Putin has been reluctant to introduce nationwide emergency measures, effectively isolating himself from both the virus and any political responsibility.

The language of the government during the crisis has highlighted this reluctance; In his few public addresses Putin has avoided the terms "confinement" and "lockdown" instead labelling this time as "non-working" days and weeks. The Kremlin has also been very visibly demonstrating how protected Putin is. This was seen in Putin's only hospital visit, in Kommunark during the pandemic, where he was pictured dressed in a full hazmat suit.²⁰ This acts a demonstration to not just the public, but to the Russian elite that Putin's position is more than stable and that no level of pandemic will start a conversation about succession. This is all indicative of a leader that is avoiding personal participation and unwilling to mobilise the country against the virus.²¹

Historically, Putin has been a very risk averse leader and it is unlikely to take action unless there is a clear outcome in which he benefits from. COVID-19 is an obvious example of an unknown entity,

¹⁴ <https://www.ridl.io/en/the-harsh-summer-of-2020/>

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-52023523/coronavirus-migrants-stranded-in-moscow-airports>

¹⁶ See for example Tajikistan where 50% GDP originates from remittances.

¹⁷ <https://eurasianet.org/what-eurasia-can-expect-from-the-oil-crash>

¹⁸ <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/04/13/constitutional-amendments-2/>

¹⁹ https://wciom.ru/news/ratings/doverie_politikam/

²⁰ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/29/kremlin-terrified-putin-will-catch-covid-19-whole-regime-will/>

²¹ <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=4a726f50-e5a2-4f97-b28d-7e69f4b1464c>

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with no end in sight and there have been clear signs of Putin averting risks and has become essentially paralysed. However, the effectiveness of remaining detached from the situation is becoming more and more questionable as the situation worsens.

Moreover, Putin is treating the virus as biological threat rather than a political one. Putin is much more comfortable focusing on issues that influence Russia's place on the world stage, rather than issues of public health. We have seen Putin's most visible activity over the last few months in the form of geo-political gestures, such as the donation of medical equipment to Italy and the United States.²²

Ideally, the shifting of responsibility will, in the long run, remove blame away from the president towards regional authorities. This however is a strategy that works against the last 20 years of building up a hyper-presidential system, designed for the person at the top to take charge in a national emergency. Instead, Putin sits back, and central government criticises the work and approaches of the regional authorities despite their limited powers and resources to adequately tackle the crisis.

Despite an increase in resources distributed between the regions, some authorities are only spending a minimal amount on COVID-19 related expenses.²³ Whether this due to a lack of available equipment to buy on the market, lack of infrastructure and apparatus to mobilise, or indeed the lack of knowledge on how to effectively fight this unknown virus without the help of the Federal Centre.

The complexities of dealing with the novella virus have been demonstrated in the west over the past months and it is still no clearer as to what exactly is or is not an effective strategy. Individual regions are faced with deciding what is best in terms of medical, economic and social outcomes, something that will be very difficult for small regions like the Republic of Komi who are already struggling significantly with the strain on both the local economy and the health care system.²⁴

As we have seen with the protests in Vladikavkaz, attention and anger was targeted at the leader of South Ossetia and not directly against Putin. This not only makes the protests more acceptable in the eyes of the Kremlin but demonstrates the adaptability of the decentralisation strategy. For those Like Sergey Sobyenin, their handling of the strategy will make or break them as relative newcomers to the Front line of Russian politics. However, for the Likes of Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic, a federal subject with greater autonomy than other regions, the Kremlin's response will differ.

Chechnya was the first of 20 regions to implement mandatory isolation measures to fight the virus.²⁵ This included a very strong physical policing presence, closures of internal borders and very vocal campaign against spreaders of both the virus and what was perceived to be fake news about the virus. Ramzan Kadyrov has been met with criticism from human rights watchdogs for his treatment of journalists in the region and repression of the press, as well as a slap on the wrist from Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin for shutting of the Chechnya from the rest of Russia, branding Kadyrov's measures as "unacceptable".^{26,27}

In part, the justification for decentralisation is indeed that Putin does not want to be associated with what are inevitably negative consequences of dealing with the virus. The power vertical in Russia, in

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/coronavirus-russia-sends-plane-full-of-medical-supplies-to-us>

²³ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-response-covid-19>

²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/19/world/europe/russia-komi-coronavirus.html>

²⁵ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-response-covid-19>

²⁶ <https://meduza.io/news/2020/04/01/pervyy-region-rossii-ob-yavil-o-zakrytii-svoih-granits-iz-za-koronavirusa-eto-chechnya>

²⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/news/russia-censors-novaya-gazeta-chechen-leaders-behest>

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which Putin relies on his presidential administration and his ministers, to send orders that travel from the very top the bottom. However, at each level, there are people propping up the system, and in this context, if the governors can play the role of good soldier they will be rewarded by the Kremlin. The question is... how will these governors respond? will they act to the best of their abilities or will they pretend to and make deals with local elites thus stagnating the system?

Conclusion

The pandemic has taken hold in Russia and is spreading rapidly from the epicentre in Moscow. Left with a weak response from the federal government, regional authorities are beginning deal with the crisis as Russia reaches the peak of transmissions over the next few weeks. The pandemic could not have come at a worse time for a regime seeking to solidify its domestic power in the context of years of declining popularity for Putin. It is not yet clear how severe the spread of the virus is yet and whether or not Russia health care system will be able to cope in the coming weeks. If regions like Moscow can get back on their feet sooner than later, with a relatively low death toll, support for the regime may not falter to dangerous levels.

However, if the virus spreads across the regions, Russia could be heading for summer beset by recession, civil unrest and major obstacles for Putin's reform package. Russia's relationship with its near abroad will also be affected as China starts to recover and pursue interests in Central Asia, Russia may struggle to maintain strong economic ties with the region. Ruptures in the relationship with Belarus as result of President Alexander Lukashenka's dangerous, do nothing, approach to the virus could see the country turn to the European Union for financial aid if virus spread further there. The next weeks will be crucial for Putin as his actions will be under great scrutiny both domestically and internationally.

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