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Putin's Coronavirus Crisis Is Not "Under Control"

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus has caused a three-dimensional crisis in Russia: a health crisis, an economic crisis, and a personal crisis for Putin. The false low figures Moscow has released about domestic virus cases and deaths are an attempt to disguise a devastating situation.

The health crisis

Though Russia contains 146 million people, it has been largely ignored by the global media in its coverage of the coronavirus crisis. What little information is available on the state of the virus inside the country appears highly suspect.

Moscow initially claimed that out of more than 116,000 tests for coronavirus in Russia, there were only 147 confirmed cases and zero deaths—fewer casualties than Luxembourg, which has a population of fewer than 628,000 people.

Russia credits its own foresight for this anomaly. Its representative to the WHO, Melita Vunovic, told CNN that Russia started testing "literally at the end of January" (whereas US testing only got underway in March), and that tracing contacts, quarantining, and social distancing all started "relatively early."

It is true that at the end of January, Russia closed its 2,600 mile land border with China, whose Wuhan district introduced the virus to the world—but most of Russia's many borders with other neighbors remained open far longer.

On March 17, daily life in Russia still seemed largely normal. President Vladimir Putin told a government meeting, "We were able to contain the mass penetration and spread" of the pandemic. "The situation is generally under control despite high risk levels," he said.

Things were not “under control.” Two days later, Russia reacted to furious necessity, closing its borders, schools, and businesses, and providing economic packages and essential social distancing directives that were already in place in other countries. Meanwhile, the Russian people, skeptical of the low reported figures on cases and deaths, had already begun emptying grocery shelves of buckwheat, a major staple.

A new countrywide alliance of doctors stated that the real figures for illnesses and deaths were in the thousands. They videotaped calls from physicians who had been told to prepare for a huge rise in “pneumonia cases.” In addition to the prospect of an onslaught of sufferers, they also had the problem of insufficient quantities of protective equipment.

At the forefront of this group is Russian doctor Anastasia Vasilyeva, head of a medical workers union, who quickly realized what these “pneumonia” cases actually were. Government statistics were being manipulated to conceal the spread of the coronavirus by attributing hospitalizations and deaths not to the pandemic but to pneumonia and other ailments.

Vasilyeva called on Russian doctors to counter the false information and go public with their knowledge. “While the whole world is facing an outbreak of a new coronavirus, Russia is facing an outbreak of a community-acquired pneumonia,” she said. “And as usual we are facing the lie of the authorities.”

Vasilyeva was arrested when she attempted to deliver desperately needed protective medical gear to hospitals in Novogorod. Most of her companions were released, but she was reportedly dragged to a police station where she was “choked and hit in the abdomen and passed out as a result.” Denied access to a lawyer for hours, she spent the night in police detention.

“It is staggering,” wrote Amnesty International’s Russia director, Natalia Zviagina, “that the Russian authorities appear to fear criticism more than the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.”

In late March, the Russian parliament approved new legislation including fines and jail sentences for spreading “fake news” about the virus.

In Russia, free speech is expensive. Russia has been hit hard in recent weeks and seems largely unprepared for what is to come. As in China, hiding the truth has cost precious time.

Worse yet, according to *Foreign Policy*, there is evidence that the lab in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk that is processing all the country’s coronavirus tests has been overwhelmed by the growing backlog. Moreover, Russia’s test, which is reportedly locally developed, produces many false negatives. It can only detect the coronavirus

virus when its density in a sample is more than 100,000 viruses per milliliter. In the US the virus can be detected if it has a density of only 6,250 per milliliter.

The Russian health ministry reported that by March 21, the country had performed 133,101 tests and recorded only 253 confirmed cases of the virus even as other countries were reporting thousands of cases. At the same time, Russia's official statistics agency recorded a "[37% rise](#) in community-acquired pneumonia." There was wide reporting of a need for more hospital beds and equipment to deal with this surge of "pneumonia."

Since then, social quarantines and lockdowns in Russia have been extremely strict. On March 31, the Russian parliament approved legislation imposing fines of up to the equivalent of \$640 and up to seven years in prison for anyone who defies the quarantine.

On April 18, CNN reported that the Johns Hopkins University Center for Systems Science and Engineering had put the Russian figures at 36,793 cases and 313 deaths. On the same date, the US reported 711,197 cases and 37,309 deaths. (Reporting times vary, and US statistics are updated every 15 minutes.)

The expectation is that the numbers of cases and fatalities for Russia will continue to rise, as they have in Europe and America, and Russia is not prepared.

The economic crisis

Lockdowns and quarantines have naturally driven down demand for oil in industrial countries. Oil prices have therefore plummeted, devastating oil producers like Russia. In Moscow, apparently the epicenter of the virus in the country, Mayor Sergei Sobyenin has been told that a lack of aid to small and medium-sized businesses may lead to mass starvation.

The Russian economy, insufficiently diversified, is hugely dependent on hydrocarbons. As OPEC and Russia argued over what level of oil output to maintain, an initial deal with the Saudis to cut production in order to raise the price of oil fell through. Then came a price war as the Saudis, eager to gain market share, cut the price of energy transferred to Europe.

On April 10, at a meeting of leading oil producers including America that was apparently mediated by President Trump, an agreement was finalized to cut production to 10 million barrels of oil a day. The agreement was blocked by Mexico, however, and a new deal by which Riyadh and Moscow would take on a larger share of the necessary cuts until things improve also seems to have fallen through. In some areas, as demand has continued to drop, oil has even gone into negative territory.

There have been huge gyrations in the Russian stock market as the oil giants battle one another. Catastrophe awaits thousands of Russian industrial workers. At this writing, the ruble is worth \$0.013.

Putin's political crisis

The third aspect to the coronavirus crisis is its effect on Putin's efforts to remain in power long after his term expires in 2024. Having ruled Russia for almost two decades through his "round robin" deal with Dmitri Medvedev, periodically trading the positions of president and prime minister, Putin is now after bigger game.

After promising to put more power in the hands of parliament, he gained its approval, and that of Russia's Constitutional Court, for a vote on legislation that would effectively reset his presidential term tally to zero, allowing him to serve two more back-to-back six-year terms. His present term ends in 2024. If he succeeds in these machinations, Putin will be 84 when the second of his new terms ends in 2036.

Putin is attempting a coup d'état: a grab for perpetual dictatorship.

The national vote to approve these changes was originally set for April 22 but has been postponed following calls to delay it during the pandemic. An accurate vote is difficult in Russia under any circumstances but the coronavirus has upended any prospects for a vote, at least for the present.

Ironically, there could be a temporary upside to Putin's continued holding of the reins during the crisis. He has the capacity to cut through political knots on behalf of those stricken by the disease—if he so wishes. But can one trust that Putin will ever surrender any of his powers to parliament?

Initially, a deluge of bad news had Putin going into retreat, leaving it to his subordinates to take the fall for the deadly missteps. But as the number of cases ballooned, he reemerged and took command. According to Putin, the vote was postponed because "the absolute priority for us is the health, life, and safety of the people."

Conclusion

It is always difficult to extract reliable information from a closed society, and in the present instance, Russia may not even have the ability to make an accurate assessment of the impact of the coronavirus across its vast territory. In addition, the treatment of those willing to speak the truth about the pandemic shows there is nothing new in Russia. The authoritarian leadership still favors secrecy and selectively determines what and how much should be revealed.

President Trump's first words, when he learned of the virus in late January, were similar to Putin's. He reportedly told the WHO on January 22 that he wasn't worried about the coronavirus because "we have it totally under control."

Still, Trump's travel restrictions plan was conceived on Jan. 31, 2020—just one day after the first confirmed case of person-to-person transmission in the US. Those restrictions, which went into effect on February 2, 2020, initially restricted flights from China and then from Europe. The US responded more quickly to the crisis because the truth about the pandemic was being made manifest and no one was punished for telling it.

It is imperative that Russia overcome what Andrey Kortunov, director of the Russian International Affairs Council, calls "a political and psychological immunodeficiency ... an absence of the instinct that is inherent in any biological species to protect one's own population." We join him in the wish that "mankind...focus on finding a solution to a truly universal problem."

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