



Russia & COVID-19: An Elite Compelled to Act

Gaël-Georges Moullec, *Revue politique et parlementaire*, 17 April 2020

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Although March 2020 was shaping up handsomely for Russian President Vladimir Putin, with his constitutional reforms progressing at breakneck speed, his country's haphazard management of the COVID-19 crisis might yet discredit him in the eyes of the Russian people. Analysis by Gaël-Georges Moullec, doctor of Contemporary History and teaching fellow at the Rennes School of Business and Université Paris 13.

According to the Russian press, the country's first case was on 31 January 2020, when a few members of the privileged class and a selection of show business stars were hospitalised in an ultra-modern clinic located in one of Moscow's exclusive outlying districts. Consequently, Russians believed that COVID-19 was a disease rich people caught at Courchevel and its wild parties, where Russia and Ukraine's elites regularly mix.

By mid-March, measures had slowly started to take shape.

First, charter flights from China were banned (while regular air travel was kept open); then, people coming back from contaminated France, Italy, Spain and Germany were quarantined at home for a fortnight after being registered en masse at Sheremetyevo Airport's Terminal F.

According to official standards, on the eve of the crisis Russia should have had 1,172,000 hospital beds (including 35,000 in intensive care) and 52,000 ventilators. In reality, it had 12,000 beds in ICUs (2,500 of which were in Moscow) and 33,000 to 40,000 ventilators (5,000 of which were, again, in Moscow)¹.

As infection numbers increased, President Putin made his first televised address on 25 March, during which he announced that workplaces across the country would be closed for a week, but did not give a clear indication that movement might be restricted. In combination, these two messages led to Russia's first misstep: huge numbers of people left for their country homes, or *dachas*, or attended overly sociable barbecues (including in city parks).

While today the crisis' peak is still a way off, total lockdown has been ordered for over-65s until the end of April and the working population outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg (where lockdown is in full force) has to follow sometimes contradictory recommendations from their employers and local authorities.

Schoolchildren of all ages and students have been given the clearest instructions, as all educational establishments have been shut across Russia.

¹ Andrei Zlobin, "Projet" – en Russie le nombre de lits de réanimation est trois fois moins que prévu, Forbes, 30 March 2020.

	Number of tests	Number of infected people	Number of people infected on 16 April 2020	Total deaths
Russia	1,610,000	27,938	3,448	232
Moscow		16,146		113
Moscow region		3,054		33
Saint Petersburg		1,083		7

(Source: www.stopcoronavirus.rf – 17 April 2020)

Judging by the President's four weekly statements (on 25 March, 2 April, 8 April and 15 April 2020), Russia's economic and health policy for tackling the crisis can be summarised as follows:

An unevenly applied lockdown until 30 April;

200 billion roubles (€2.47 billion) in aid for Russian regions to assist local policies designed to combat the epidemic, as well as 23 billion roubles of support (€280 million) for major industrial operators such as airlines. There are plans to suspend small and medium-sized enterprises and industrial companies' tax payments. Banks are also obliged to lend to businesses.

Locked down workers in legal employment are receiving three months of unemployment benefits (which are pegged to the minimum wage), amounting to three payments of 12,130 roubles (€150). Families with children are receiving 3,000 roubles a month per child (€37). Healthcare staff are also entitled to temporary bonuses of up to 240,000 roubles (€2,973) for three months.

A choice seems to have been made between the health of the economy and the health of the Russian people, and the government has switched to "manual steering" (or *rutchnoe upravlenie*) during the regular videoconferences which have received extensive coverage in the official media. Prime Minister Mikhail Vladimirovich Mishustin is winning public confidence and points from the press thanks to his serious tone, professionalism and ability to spur the government into action.

On the other hand, the epidemic does not appear to have re-energised the President in the same way as the crises in Georgia and Crimea did, enabling him to galvanise the public.

His first media faux pas was to call for unity among the Russian people by citing the historic invasion of Pecheneg and Polovtsian hordes from the 9th to 11th centuries, much in the same way that President Macron asked the French to recall the victory at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains in an effort to bring the country together. The volume of mocking commentaries was such that the President's press officer and the official media were forced to start the risky task of explicating his words. In Putin's 20 years of power, this was a first.

The policy of "manual steering" gives each region and each rung of local power, from mayors to governors and presidents of the various republics, the ability to tailor national measures to their own territory.

Setting aside sectors and businesses which central government has designated as strategically important and each region's obligations to meet certain hospital capacity levels (in terms of numbers of beds and ventilators), local authorities can limit inter-regional travel in their territory and decide which businesses can stay open, what lockdown conditions to implement and even whether ceremonies can be held for the upcoming Orthodox Easter, at a time when central government has announced celebrations to mark VE Day's 75th anniversary are being postponed.

A polite way to describe the picture would be "diverse".

The wide scope for action accorded to local officials could not, however, be more important to those who wish to join Putin's elite.

As such, despite occasional difficulties, the Mayor of Moscow has emerged unscathed as compared to his counterpart in Saint Petersburg, while officials in Tatarstan have not only secured masks from China but set up production lines too, so that it can quickly make 15 million extra products per month for a population of 4 million people.

Beyond the statistics, governors' regular appearances in official media have proved a moment of truth that some will struggle to shake off. This includes the leader of Tula, a man once considered to be Putin's presumptive heir. For others, such as Perm's interim governor, these testing times have provided a real career boost.

As has often been the case in Russian history, central authorities have been highly responsive when it comes to dealing with foreign partners, despite the sluggish reaction within the country. As a result, on 22 and 25 March, at Russia's request 15 aeroplanes immediately transported 120 Italian virologists and their equipment to launch a wide-reaching disinfection campaign in Russian care homes. On 2 April, a Russian plane touched down in the USA stocked with ventilators; and on 4 April, Serbia saw 11 planes deliver 87 virologists and their equipment. By comparison, China sent six doctors to Serbia, for example.

The crisis in Russia is, unfortunately, only just beginning. It may ultimately destabilise current power structures if federal authorities' limitations become too apparent – or it may be the baptism of fire that helps to identify the future's most effective leaders. Let's hope that the second scenario comes to pass, as this would mean that the crisis has been choked off in such a way that it claimed as few lives as possible.

Recalling that Russia had been cast out of and sanctioned by the international sphere in the wake of the unfortunate Salisbury incident due to what some countries claimed was bioterrorism, how should we construe the current situation, given that we are already aware who its perpetrators are?

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