Russia and the coronavirus crisis

Official data suggest that Russia has been less affected by the Covid-19 pandemic than most other countries so far. However, the authorities’ slow response and the poor state of the healthcare system risk aggravating the situation. For Vladimir Putin, the crisis has at least made it easier for him to push through constitutional changes potentially giving him 12 more years in power. Moscow is also accused of taking advantage of the crisis for geopolitical ends, for example by spreading destabilising disinformation targeted at Western countries.

After a slow start, the virus is now spreading fast

Coronavirus was slow to spread to Russia. The first cases on 31 January 2020 concerned two Chinese nationals in Siberia. After a gap of over three weeks with no new reported cases, Covid-19 was recorded in several Russian nationals returning from abroad, in particular from Italy. The first infection inside Russia itself was not confirmed until 15 March. Since then, the numbers have grown exponentially, reaching 52 763 infections and 456 deaths as of 21 April. Most of these are concentrated in Moscow, but all of Russia’s 84 other regions are affected. Russia still has a relatively low infection rate (365 confirmed cases per million of population, around one-quarter of those recorded in most western European countries); however, this could change, as the epidemic has not yet reached its peak, with a record 5 642 new cases on 21 April 2020. Covid-19 may have spread further than official statistics suggest. In January 2020, pneumonia cases in Moscow surged 37% year-on-year; doctors suspect that coronavirus could have caused part of the increase. Such under-reporting could be the result of a deliberate cover-up, or it could indicate that the tests used by Russia are not sensitive enough to identify all cases. One week after Putin had declared the situation to be ‘under control’, on 24 March Moscow mayor, Sergey Sobyanin, acknowledged that the true picture could be worse than expected.

Containment measures: Slow response allows Covid-19 to take hold

On 31 January, Russia closed its far eastern border. While this measure succeeded in blocking contamination from China, travel from western European countries was not restricted until much later, allowing the epidemic to take hold in mid-March. Public events also continued until a relatively late stage, with football fans still attending matches on 14 March and declaring their willingness ‘to die for their clubs’. Not until 30 March, two weeks after some European countries imposed lockdown measures, were Moscovites confined to their homes. Since then, they are only allowed out to buy food or medicines, or to walk pets up to a radius of 100 metres from their homes. Residents of the capital are also required to apply for a digital pass before using their cars or public transport. Most other Russian regions followed suit shortly afterwards; the most draconian measures are in Chechnya, which has closed its borders to the rest of the country and imposed a night-time curfew (regional head Ramzan Kadyrov has even suggested that quarantine violators should be executed). To ensure that shops do not run out of food, on 2 April Russia, which is the world’s top wheat exporter, decided to restrict cereal exports.

There have been criticisms of Russia’s handling of the crisis. In the early stages, coronavirus patients in hospitals were not systematically isolated, nor were Russians returning from abroad always properly tested. Chinese nationals complained of arbitrary harassment. Activists accused the government of hiding the extent of the epidemic. After Putin ordered Russians to take a week off work starting from 28 March, some took it as an opportunity for a seaside holiday. In Moscow, initial enforcement of the lockdown was lax.

Russia’s under-funded healthcare system is poorly prepared for a surge in coronavirus cases: protective equipment such as masks and gloves is often lacking, and there are not enough beds for intensive-care patients. Emergency hospitals are now being hastily built to make up the shortfall; 95 000 beds are planned for Covid-19 patients, but it is not clear how many of these are ready. Also unclear is the number of ventilators available. Moreover, due to an import substitution drive restricting purchases of foreign equipment, many of these are locally manufactured and of inferior quality.
Economic consequences: Despite resilience, a heavy blow to the economy

Russia, which has low levels of national debt (in 2019, just 15% of gross domestic product (GDP), compared to an EU average of 80%) and international reserves worth over US$500 billion, is relatively well placed to spend its way out of the crisis. The government is planning bailouts for airlines and tourism companies, additional transfers to regional governments, and support for companies which are ‘systemically important’ for the Russian economy. Small businesses will receive financial incentives not to lay off employees. US$40 billion (2.8% of Russian GDP) has been set aside for these measures.

This is, however, modest compared to the United States’ US$2 trillion package, equivalent to 10% of GDP, and will likely not be enough to stave off a severe economic recession; former finance minister and Audit Chamber head, Andrey Kudrin, has warned that the economy could shrink by as much as 8%. Apart from the direct impact of the coronavirus-related economic shutdown, there is also the global collapse in demand for oil, as a result of the pandemic. In 2019, hydrocarbons generated over half of Russia’s exports to the world, and nearly 40% of federal budget revenue; collapsing oil prices will therefore hit its economy hard. A prolonged recession could erode support for Putin, who has made reviving the economy one of the top priorities of his fourth presidency.

Domestic policy implications: Facilitating authoritarian rule

In March 2020, Putin signed off a package of amendments that open the door for him to stay on as president, potentially until 2036. Even before the gravity of the coronavirus threat became clear, opposition to constitutional change had been muted; however, the crisis could facilitate the process by distracting public attention and supporting Putin’s argument that global turbulence makes a strong president more necessary than ever. Due to a ban on public gatherings, there will be no protestors on the streets, although an online rally is planned for 28 April (on the other hand, the pandemic also means that a national vote to endorse the changes, originally scheduled for 22 April, has had to be postponed).

The pandemic gives the Kremlin an opportunity to turn the screws even further on its critics. For example, a newly adopted law against coronavirus-related ‘fake news’ is being used to block media reports on the government’s handling of the situation. Although Russia is not the only country to track persons at risk of spreading the disease, through facial recognition cameras and geolocation data from mobile phones, such surveillance technologies raise concerns about possible future abuse.

Foreign policy implications: Russia using the pandemic to make geopolitical gains

Russia has sent staff and equipment to several countries, including the United States and Italy, to help them battle the virus. However, Russian doctors criticised such deliveries as a publicity stunt designed to score geopolitical points, while depriving them of scarce resources needed to fight the country’s own epidemic. According to one report, most of the assistance provided to Italy was in any case useless. None of these criticisms have deterred Russian media from underscoring the contrast between Moscow’s generosity, and the reluctance of fellow EU countries to come to Italy’s assistance.

Although the Russian authorities are themselves clamping down on what they describe as fake news about coronavirus, pro-Kremlin outlets – some with direct links to the Russian state, such as Sputnik – have been actively spreading misinformation in western countries, according to a European External Action Service report. Claims are being propagated that the US created Covid-19 as a biological weapon, that the EU is on the point of collapse, that migrants are spreading the virus, and even that the entire pandemic is a hoax. What these contradictory theories have in common is their destabilising effect, spreading fear and undermining trust in the authorities. Commenting on a Russian senator’s claim that Poland had closed its airspace to Russian planes bringing aid to Italy, the EU’s ambassador in Moscow, Markus Ederer, called for joint efforts ‘to fight coronavirus, not the truth’. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova countered by accusing the EU of disinformation about her country’s ‘humanitarian aid’ to Italy.

On 26 March, Putin urged G20 leaders to suspend sanctions for humanitarian reasons, a call reiterated a few days later in a resolution on Covid-19 submitted by Russia to the United Nations General Assembly. Backed mostly by countries, such as Venezuela, which also face restrictive measures, the text was not adopted. On 6 April, a spokesperson for the European External Action Service confirmed that the EU had no plans to lift its Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia, as they did not prevent it from fighting the virus.