

Putin's Power Grab Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Written by Ludovica Vitale

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LUDOVICA VITALE, JUN 29 2020

In March 2020, after months of speculation and an unexpected reshuffle of Russia's government, the parliament approved a sweeping constitutional reform that removes the two consecutive terms limits on Russia's presidency, potentially allowing President Vladimir Putin to remain in power for another 12 years after his current presidential term runs out in 2024. Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, a public vote on constitutional changes began on 25 June and is set to culminate on 1 July. For Putin's administration, the coronavirus pandemic has come at the best time as the COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing measures have crippled popular mobilizations. Last year, Russia's bill to increase the pension age and the disqualification of opposition candidates ahead of Moscow city Duma elections saw the capital packed with protesters. In March, as Putin formally signed off the constitutional changes that will potentially keep him in power until 2036, only a small number of people took the streets as protests were called off due to lockdown measures.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has offered Putin the opportunity to extend his term beyond 2024 without a single canister of tear gas being fired, it has also brought unprecedented challenges. Putin's handling of the pandemic has seen his popularity rating reaching its lowest level since he came to power in 2000, plausibly damaging the momentum behind a crucial initiative to legitimise his power.

The power of crises

It is impossible to know when exactly Russian authorities decided to change Russia's constitution in order to brush aside Presidential term limits. There is no evidence that Putin, let alone Russian officials, resorted to a Machiavellian ploy to effectively "re-set the count" on Putin's term limits in March 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid persistent speculations regarding Putin's future – from Putin presiding over a new country as a result of Belarus merging with Russia, to him becoming the president over an empowered state council or the prime minister in a new parliamentary system – uncertainty around Russia's political transition was still looming large back in January.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic struck its Western counterparts, the Kremlin undoubtedly saw an opportunity. In a series of unexpected political steps, authorities proposed amendments to the constitution just as most countries in Europe were bracing for COVID-19 and Italy implementing a national lockdown. The move was scheduled for a 22 April referendum, but was abruptly postponed in a bid to reduce the contagion. In addition, on 13 May, the Duma submitted draft legislation allowing elections and referendums to be conducted via the Internet. The law was approved by the Federation Council only one week later. Eligible citizens in the pandemic hard-hit regions will be allowed to cast their ballots on the proposed constitutional changes online. Remote voting will likely facilitate the falsification of election results over more conventional forms of fraud such as ballot stuffing or attacks on vote observers.

This is not the first time that Russian elites used an external crisis to reinforce their grip on power. Crises have helped in facilitating some of the government's social policies that promote state control and surveillance, by reanimating old phobias and conspiracies about an attack by the West or by playing up the imminent threat of terrorism. In 2014, in the aftermath of Putin's moves against Ukraine, Russian authorities approved a series of amendments to the Criminal Code of Federal Law and Article 31 of the Criminal Procedure, which allowed them to adopt an unprecedented increase of punishment for 'extremist' related crimes – such as prison terms up to 6 years and

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heavier sanctions against allegedly 'extremist' organizations. Authorities also introduced substantial fines and increased prison terms for taking part in anti-government demonstrations.

Crises play a large part in social control. From Chile's piranhas after the Pinochet's coup to Margaret Thatcher's post-Falklands War privatisation and China's radical economic reforms following the Tiananmen Square massacre, crises have proven to serve political and economic interests. Many scholars agree that during crises people become more willing to give up their rights and civil liberties or accept austerity so that leaders can take political actions against external or internal enemies. Partly, this is because most people facing a crisis seem to care less about democratic practices; they want to save whatever they can, pick up the pieces where possible and move on. National decision-makers, police and other agencies of social control all benefit from the context of fear. It was a perceived rise in violent crime among Americans to allow Ronald Reagan to introduce an unprecedented expansion of police powers during the early to the mid-80s.[1]

Like in many other regimes across the world, this "besieged fortress" strategy has galvanised Russia's patriotic agenda on a grand scale, arguably increasing popular support for the Putin's regime. War has emerged as a framework for building identities and engaging in social life. With some of the latest military parades involving a record number of servicemen, the 9 May Victory Day, marking the defeat of Nazism during World War II, has become an ideal communication format to mobilise masses around this defensive ideology, effectively combining together fear and entertainment. This might help to explain public attitudes towards some of Russia's adventures abroad. In the years since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin's public support had reached a record high of 80%. Yet, while public enthusiasm for Moscow's involvement in the Syrian conflict was somewhat limited, millions of Russians have followed nightly bulletins showing Russian military launching missiles from the Caspian Sea on terrorist targets in Syria.

Managing the COVID-19 crisis

While on a number of occasions crises have worked as a catalyst of Putin's popularity, the COVID-19 pandemic has badly damaged his prestige, with his approval rating falling to an all-time low since he first became president in 2000. According to a poll published by the independent Levada Center in May, support for Putin fell to 59% in April, down from 63% in the previous month. As the COVID-19 pandemic struck Russia, Putin became largely absent and let others, like Sergey Sobyenin, Moscow's mayor, fill the void and thrive on the front lines of the crisis. Putin's disinclination to accept responsibility for the pandemic has contributed to exacerbate distrust towards the government, however COVID-19 has exposed the regime's underlying vulnerabilities.

Putin's efforts to restore Russia's position as a global superpower have come at the expense of Russia's social and economic development. At times, this has caused a downward spiral of economic hardship, such as when the West placed sanctions on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea. In March, Russia rejected Saudi Arabia's plan to cut global oil production on the ground that the move would mainly benefit rival producers in the United States. This effectively triggered an oil price war that resulted in a significant loss of state revenues. Although Russia has implemented a series of relief measures to mitigate the effect of the lockdown on businesses, the overall stimulus package has been modest, estimated at around 4% of Russia's GDP. By the end of May, only 10% of businesses reportedly received support packages, while for the vast majority of them there remains uncertainty about what the future holds.

As the lockdown eases in Russia, despite the risk of a second wave of infections, regions across the country are left battling the crisis on their own. Perhaps in an attempt to avoid blame over the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, Putin has given regional governors additional authority and heavier responsibilities to tackle the crisis. Yet, owing in part to a corruption scheme that diverts public funds to the elite in Moscow, limited economic assistance from the federal government and under-resourced healthcare infrastructures, Russia's regional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic was generally poor, with governors relying on increased surveillance, strict social distancing measures, and even financial support from local oligarchs. Additionally, the top-down selection process of regional governors means that access to regional offices largely depends on loyalty to the Kremlin, *de facto* undermining the competency and skills required to ensure preparedness for crisis situations.

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The unwanted implications of a crisis

With the government still crumbling under the strain of coronavirus, the referendum is vital for the regime's political stability. According to law, there is no need to hold a referendum to change the constitution. However, the referendum is seen as a way to show the public's support for these changes. While collective actions and a politically active civil society are indeed a problem for the elite as they are perceived as a threat to Russia's power structure, the government strongly relies on the people's participation in public consultation and public votes to maintain legitimacy.

In the face of a seemingly growing public discontent linked to the government's response to COVID-19, the desire to reinvigorate support is evident as the elites attempt to trade the crisis for provisions intended to improve the referendum appeal. Among the changes inserted into the constitution's structure, there are increased economic benefits, such as pension indexing and minimum wage guarantees; efforts to restore traditional norms and values, including legal requirements that determine the validity of a marriage exclusively between a man and a woman; and an emphasis on Russian sovereignty, which contains a ban that prohibits officials from opening bank accounts abroad.

However, the "carrot" approach may not work this time. What is becoming clear is that the coronavirus crisis is significantly different from previous ones. A virus is not something you can overcome by promoting anti-Americanism, the struggle against fascism in Ukraine or by restoring Russian sovereignty and uniqueness of values. In the face of a crisis driven by a virulent pandemic, rather than political or ideological factors, efforts to sustain popular legitimacy through the use of propaganda will prove less effective.

Furthermore, the coronavirus crisis has increased an existing trend, which is that support among Russians for the regime has been declining since Putin started his third Presidential term. Although Putin's performance remained high in 2011, ratings steadily declined from a high of 80% in 2010 to 64% in 2013. This coincided with Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, after an interlude in which he took on the role of Prime Minister as he was constitutionally barred to serve a third consecutive term. The 2014 Crimea annexation and Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict in 2015, which effectively made the country a global player in the Middle East, reinvigorated support for Putin. Nevertheless, Russia's controversial bill to increase the pension age in 2018 and slow economic growth, as a result of falling oil prices and Western sanctions, saw his rating falling again to 66% in 2019. The 59% rating according to the recent poll published by the Levada Center in May marked a new historic low for Putin.

Added to this is that Putin's low approval ratings come at a time when public demonstrations have spread across Belarus in response to President Alexander Lukashenko seeking a sixth Presidential term in an election scheduled for 9 August. Lukashenko is facing an unprecedented challenge to his power since he first was elected in 1994. Belarus' worsening economic situation and the government's lack of action to prevent the spread of the coronavirus outbreak have seen thousands of people taking to the streets in support of opposition candidates. Though opinion polling is limited in Belarus, none of the publicly available polls show that Lukashenko enjoys significant support. The recent protests in Belarus are nothing like Ukraine's Maidan in 2014 or the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia. However, amid fear of similar sentiment spreading further east, the implications of popular disaffection in Belarus are significant in Russia, where pro-democracy movements are perceived to promote regime change.

With falling popular support and the unrest in Belarus, political pressure is unprecedented in Russia. Since he came to power in 2000, Putin has sought to create an image of stability in contrast with the chaos of the post-Soviet 1990s. He presented himself as a strong man who could deal with a fragile political system, a fragmented civil society and the terrorist threat emanating from Chechnya. International and domestic crises have often been amplified in the Russian media and have become part of Putin's allure, distracting attention from scarce economic resources and an increasingly authoritarian society. While the lockdown to contain the spread of the pandemic has arguably allowed authorities to scrap Putin's Presidential limits without sparking significant demonstrations, the coronavirus crisis has eroded support for the regime and ultimately further damaged the foundations of Putin's power; material well-being in return for political compliance.

While the full implications of the COVID-19 crisis are yet to be seen in Russia, in the short-term, the Kremlin will likely

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face the inherent weakness of their strategy – which is that not every crisis can be successfully exploited.

Note

[1] Brian Massumi 'Everywhere You Want to Be', in *The Politics of Every Day Fear*, Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

About the author:

Ludovica Vitale is a a pseudonym used by the author to protect their identity when writing on this issue.