

A microscopic image of COVID-19 virus particles, showing their characteristic spherical shape and numerous spike-like projections (glycoprotein spikes) extending from the surface. The image is rendered in a teal color scheme and is partially obscured by a dark teal rectangular overlay on the left side.

COVID-19 IN EURASIA

PONARS EURASIA POLICY PERSPECTIVES
APRIL 2021

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Program Directors: Henry E. Hale and Marlene Laruelle

Editors: Margaret Evered, Madeline McCann, and Alexander Schmemmann

PONARS Eurasia
Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES)
Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University
1957 E Street NW, Suite 412
Washington, DC 20052
Tel: (202) 994-6340
www.ponarseurasia.org

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Part I.
Facing the Unknown: Post-Soviet Responses to
COVID-19

Post-Soviet State Responses to COVID-19

MAKING OR BREAKING AUTHORITARIANISM?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 641
March 2020

Marlene Laruelle and Madeline McCann¹
George Washington University

Pandemics are not only a medical and social issue. They also are deeply political—even geopolitical—and feed strong-state efforts to regulate human bodies in a way some refer to as “[biopolitics](#).” COVID-19 promises to fundamentally reshape the way citizens interpret individual and collective safety, as well as the ways in which state structures conceptualize and prepare themselves for major health crises. State measures taken in response to the novel coronavirus depend largely on the nature of the political regime and its social contract with its population. While the crisis is still emerging, one can already identify three broad models: the Chinese model, in which the authoritarian state is capable of taking draconian measures to prevent the spread of disease; the Asian model, illustrated by Singapore and South Korea and characterized by mass testing and a population ready to heed state instruction closely; and the European model, where states have difficulties restraining populations’ autonomy and are unable to deploy the repressive arsenal necessary to enforce order in the face of national emergency.

A fourth broad model may be emerging in the former Soviet Union: leadership that denies the importance of the crisis and its potentially devastating impact on public health. Despite shared borders with China and Iran, high levels of internal population mobility, and frequent interactions with Europe, many of the states of Eurasia currently show some of the lowest coronavirus case rates across the continent. This suggests a serious underreporting of cases, consistent with decades-long traditions of concealment and secrecy. In what follows, we identify post-Soviet states’ political—and ideological—responses to the coronavirus outbreak (accurate as of at least March 20) and categorize them [based on](#) what we know about the diffusion of innovation, drawing tentative conclusions about the implications.

¹ [Marlene Laruelle](#) is Research Professor, Director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES), Director of the Central Asia Program, and Co-director of PONARS Eurasia at George Washington University. Madeline McCann is Program Coordinator for PONARS Eurasia at George Washington University.

Early Responders: Armenia and Georgia

Armenia was one of the earliest and most active responders to the coronavirus outbreak. On March 1, immediately after the first novel coronavirus case was confirmed there, schools, universities, and kindergartens [were](#) shut down. Authorities have [worked](#) to distribute information about the pandemic through the National Center for Disease Control and Prevention, while simultaneously [imposing](#) restrictive fines on news that does not reflect official reports, sparking concerns about censorship. The country [imposed](#) a state of emergency on March 16 that included banning all large gatherings and setting up checkpoints across the country. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has announced that the government intends to allocate at least [150 billion drams](#) (over \$300 million) to support the economy in the time to come following the crisis.

Georgia also took [active measures](#) to prevent the spread of the virus, including [closing](#) all schools on March 2 and [launching](#) a massive awareness campaign led by public health experts. On March 13, Tbilisi [announced](#) a concrete economic stimulus plan to soften the effects of the coronavirus. While it has [not yet declared](#) a state of emergency, authorities have recently [announced](#) a full ban on international travel and ordered the closure of all shops, except those with essential services such as food markets and drug stores.

Late Responders: Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine

While other neighboring countries, including Turkey, Georgia, and Armenia, acted quickly to limit travel with Iran as its infection rates soared, Azerbaijan [waited](#) over a week longer to set up screening at the border. Schools and universities in Azerbaijan have been [closed](#) since March 3. On March 13, after the country's first recorded death, authorities banned large celebrations and public events and mutually closed the border with Georgia, and later with Turkey. On March 19, Azerbaijan was the last country of the South Caucasus to [release](#) an information portal providing citizens the latest news and recommendations regarding the outbreak. The same day, President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree allocating 1 billion manats (\$600 million) to deal with the pandemic. In his address to the nation on March 18, Aliyev used the pandemic to [attack](#) political opposition parties.

On March 12, Kazakhstan closed schools and colleges and suspended all public events prior to any officially recorded cases. On March 15, following the first confirmed case of the disease, a state of emergency was [declared](#) barring most entrance and exit from the country. By March 19, Nur-Sultan and Almaty were both [sealed off](#) with security forces intended to enforce compliance, regulate operations of medical institutions, and create special checkpoints for food and medicine. The military was recruited to help [disinfect](#) cities, and an anti-crisis economic [package](#) is currently in development.

Moldova has closely followed broader coronavirus containment decisions across Europe, such as closing schools on March 11. On March 17, it [declared](#) a state of emergency, with

measures including suspending international travel and closing all non-essential shopping centers, stores, and restaurants. Media NGOs have nonetheless [criticized](#) state authorities for a lack of transparency surrounding the pandemic and requested that the government collaborate more closely with journalists during the crisis.

By March 12, Ukraine imposed a three-week nationwide quarantine and shut down educational institutions and public events with over 200 people. On March 17, all international passenger flights into and out of Ukraine [were stopped](#) and most public spaces were closed. The same day, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted a new [anti-coronavirus law](#) that sought both to limit the spread of the disease and to lay the foundations for financially supporting those facing serious repercussions from the coronavirus.

The Laggards: Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been slow to assess the levels of risk resulting from close proximity to and economic dependence on China. Uzbekistan reported its first case on March 15 and Kyrgyzstan its first three cases on March 18. These abnormally low levels reveal a lack of both testing and healthcare structures able to identify infected citizens, as the virus has likely been spreading through the populations undetected.

Both countries have taken some late measures to combat the virus's spread. On March 15, the government announced that it was [shutting down](#) educational institutions for three weeks and cancelling all public events, including Nowruz celebrations. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev [ordered](#) the government to set up a \$1 billion fund, financed by soft loans from abroad, to both curb the spread and social impact of the virus. As in Armenia, Uzbek authorities have sought to control panic in the media, announcing that, according to Uzbek law, anyone [sharing](#) information with the intention of inciting panic can face up to \$9,400 in fines and three years in prison.

On March 16, prior to any officially confirmed cases of the virus in the country, Kyrgyzstan temporarily [shut down](#) public spaces as well as schools and universities, while kindergartens [were](#) still to remain open. The following day, it banned entry to foreigners. On March 18, after the first three cases in the country were reported, it was announced that kindergartens would be closed as well. While not officially declaring a state of emergency, on March 22, the government [declared](#) an emergency "situation," forbidding travel and planning to carry out disinfection.

The Deniers: Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Belarus

Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Belarus have all either denied or minimized the severity of the COVID-19 public health crisis.

Turkmen authorities still have not recognized any cases of citizens testing positive, [denying reports](#) to the contrary. Although Turkmenistan borders Iran, there has been

almost no mention of COVID-19 in official state media since February. Despite this official silence, the state has taken [several measures](#) to combat the spread of the virus, including canceling flights, closing borders, distributing booklets about what to do in case of infection, and ultimately [sealing off](#) Ashgabat (without any public announcements) on March 20. Unlike most other Central Asian states, Turkmenistan did not cancel the official celebrations of Nowruz.

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov [announced](#) that a traditional medicinal plant from the desert, *yuzarlik* (scientific name *Peganuma harmala*) can be used to fumigate homes and prevent infectious diseases. This declaration belongs to a state repertoire that Berdymukhamedov has been building since he rose to power in 2006-2007, using health as an ideological tool to legitimate his authority. As a dentist, the president presents himself as the doctor of the nation, using health and healthcare to [brand the regime](#), from instating the Walk of Health in Ashgabat to the inauguration of Potemkin-style new hospitals across the country.

While Tajikistan has taken some steps to combat the spread of the virus, including advising its citizens to refrain from traveling to certain places and closing airports on March 20, it has consistently denied the existence of any cases and continued with business as usual. Like Turkmenistan, Tajikistan [gathered thousands](#) to proceed with the celebration of the Novruz holiday on March 21. For a country whose economy is largely dependent on Chinese production, and one with a large migrant worker community traveling regularly to and from Russia, the absence of any identified cases signals a total lack of preparedness and urgency on the part of the authorities. This is consistent with broader trends in the field of natural disaster preparedness, where Tajik authorities are notoriously limited, with a Ministry of Emergency Situations that is extremely underequipped and understaffed.

While President Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus has not denied the existence of the virus, he has consistently minimized its severity as a public health emergency. The authorities have neither closed public spaces and educational institutions, nor restricted movement into or out of the country. In his public pronouncements, the president has [played](#) the ideological cord of the “healthy peasant,” indicating that the entire problem could be solved by working in the fields, eating regularly, and, facetiously, drinking 50 grams of vodka. [According](#) to Lukashenko, “The tractor will heal everyone. The fields heal everyone.” Beyond creating a dramatic caricature of the situation, Lukashenko’s pronouncements play a significant ideological card in celebrating the rurality of the country and of its regime. The authorities have also [denounced](#) Russia’s border closing (as well as similar policies imposed by its European neighbors more generally), putting the blame on Moscow for any deterioration of the domestic economic situation.

Russia: Health and Regime Security

Russia likely belongs to the first two categories of early and late responders, depending upon the angle one takes. It was quick to close borders with China, introduce

quarantines for newcomers, and place Moscow under special safety measures, but has not yet declared a state of national emergency. While it reports an abnormally low level of infection, it has [registered](#) a huge boom in pneumonia cases since January, an indirect confirmation that the virus has been underreported or falsely attributed over the past several weeks.

The Russian government has not announced a state of emergency, but it has been closely monitoring the arrival of the virus on its national territory. The border closing with China in its Far East, with exceptions for citizens returning home, has been in effect since January 31. In March, Russia closed its borders entirely and announced a ban on the entry of foreign nationals and stateless people until May 1. This ban included citizens of neighboring Belarus and members of the Eurasian Economic Union, thus effectively cutting thousands of labor migrants from Central Asia off from their work. The closure confirms that, as in the European Union, national borders prevail over any supranational entities during times of crisis.

The government has introduced numerous measures encouraging social distancing, including prohibiting large gathers and closing schools and universities until at least April 12. The Moscow municipality under Mayor Sergey Sobyenin has been particularly pro-active, recently floating the possibility of a stay-at-home order in the case of rapid crisis escalation. It is also building large new health care facilities, trying to imitate what China did. Traffic police have launched spot checks on the city's taxis to ensure drivers wear face masks and regularly disinfect their vehicles. In remote regions, the population can still rely on outdated but existing healthcare fabric used to deal with infectious illnesses, and in major cities Russian hospitals are [well equipped](#) with respiratory systems. Historically, however, Russia has notoriously [mismanaged](#) major health crises such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which infected more than 1.3 million people.

Prime Minister Mishustin's cabinet has unveiled new economic and regulatory measures [intended](#) to mitigate impact of the coronavirus, such as home delivery of medications, special procedures to pay sick leave, and deferment of payments for companies in difficult situations. This package of measures, quite similar to the ones proposed by European governments, is a sign that the Russian authorities do indeed envision a large outbreak of the virus accompanied by a serious disruption of the national economy. Like [China](#), Russia is trying to brand itself as a supplier of international aid—to Italy in particular—confirming that the health crisis has become an object for great power competition.

Conclusion: COVID-19 State Responses, a Research Agenda

The COVID-19 pandemic will generate a whole wave of new research on how societies will transform in the wake of the trauma and how states will adapt to prepare for future public health crises. For the Eurasia region, previous literature has shown how much post-communist regimes' legitimacy relies on the ability to manage natural or industrial disasters. It thus remains to be seen if a health disaster may challenge, reinforce, or

weaken popular support for the authorities. Literature on crisis management and communication has [explored](#) how authoritarian states [manage](#) partial accountability and how citizens may [organize](#) their own responses in the face of a lack of state efficiency. Here too, the current crisis will offer a unique opportunity to study in real time how biopolitics evolves.

In Russia in particular, depending on the level of the crisis – which has yet to peak at the time of this writing – the state’s ability to present itself as having effectively managed the crisis could have deep political impacts. Faced with a [growing urban activism](#) by an active segment of the population, and a population already on edge as a result of recent welfare state and pension reforms, the authorities’ policies will be closely scrutinized. They could either increase support for the strong state as the provider of security – based on the examples that Asian countries have faced the COVID-19 crisis with more success than Europe – or, on the contrary, accelerate the delegitimization of the regime.

The Russian Power Vertical and the COVID-19 Challenge: The Trajectories of Regional Responses

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 646
April 2020

Regina Smyth Gulnaz Sharafutdinova
Indiana University *King's College London*

Timothy Model Aiden Klein
Miami University, Ohio *Indiana University*

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Russia at a precarious moment marked by a global oil war and constitutional reforms intended to secure regime stability beyond 2024. These three crises place significant pressure on the [Putin system](#) defined by its focus on statism, international standing, and a [power vertical](#) that concentrates power within the national government. As in other federal systems, the Kremlin has responded to the challenge by outlining a decentralized response, resulting in a scramble in the central and regional governments to limit costs and evade blame. In this memo, we demonstrate the variation in regional threats and regions' capacity to meet these threats, then assess the potential effects of de facto decentralization. This analysis demonstrates a mismatch between the nature of the threat and the regional resources available to meet the crisis and points to the likelihood that regional policy will vary in response to the trade-off between public health and economic costs.

Central Government Response: Decentralization and Blame Shift

The government's initial response to the virus increased autonomy for regional governors. Given the differences in geography, urbanization, and economic foundations that condition the spread of and capacity to respond to the virus, each region requires unique solutions. Regions also have variations in their capacities to implement responses

[Regina Smyth](#) is a Professor of Political Science and Faculty Affiliate of the Russian and East European Center and the Ostrom Workshop at Indiana University. [Gulnaz Sharafutdinova](#) is Reader at King's Russia Institute in the School of Politics & Economics at King's College London. [Timothy Model](#) is a Post-doctoral Fellow at the Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies at the Miami University, Ohio. [Aiden Klein](#) is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science and a Fellow at the Ostrom Workshop at Indiana University.

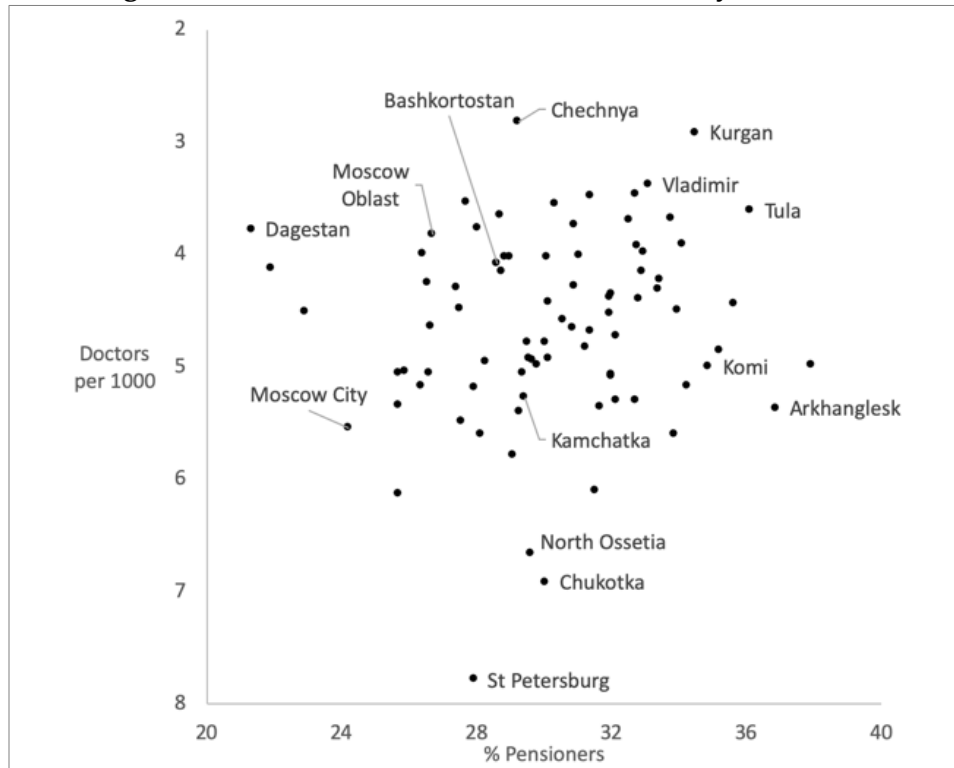
ordered from the center. These differences shape compliance with central orders and regional innovation in policy responses.

Many Russia-watchers have observed that decentralization may be part of a strategy to shift blame for the central government's response onto regions. President Vladimir Putin signaled this strategy in his April 8 meeting with governors, [saying](#), "I believe you understand how much personal responsibility you have for ensuring that the allocated funds are used as effectively as possible." Putin's [references](#) to "criminal negligence" during the April 13 meeting on the spread of COVID-19 are also indicative of his intent to shift blame to regional actors. Decentralization in the midst of crises is not unique to Russia. While macroeconomic crises often result in [recentralization](#), crises in governability—such as COVID-19—often generate [decentralization](#) as the center attempts to shift the costs, and potentially blame, for tough or unpopular measures onto local officials.

The critical difference in the ongoing crisis is how the current decentralization of authority to make policy compares to the decentralized implementation of central mandates in the power vertical. The latter mode of decentralization discouraged local initiative and fostered obedience, discipline, and loyalty in regional leaders. It also shaped Russia's current healthcare system. Russian regional authorities are primarily responsible for the design, funding, and administration of public health in response to Putin's 2012 May decrees. These decrees mandated "optimization" of the healthcare system by closing local clinics, merging hospitals, and cutting staff, all of which strained the public healthcare system. Poised to take on the rapidly developing COVID-19 crisis, regional governors now face disgruntled doctors, underpaid nurses, and medical support staff who spent much of 2019 [protesting optimization](#) decisions. As we show below, not all governors have the resources or leadership essential for navigating this crisis.

Regional Differentiation: The Nature of the Threat and Demands to Respond

A central focus at all levels of government is the challenge of managing the preservation of economic and social production while limiting the effects of the virus. Different Russian agencies are tracking the virus' spread, and their efforts show considerable variation. Novosibirsk-based 2GIS [created](#) a website that maps official Rospotrebnadzor data on cases, hospitalization, and deaths. Similarly, Russian Internet company Yandex is [mapping](#) cases and compliance with isolation orders based on traffic flows. These sources show that Moscow remains the center of the pandemic with St. Petersburg seeing increasing cases. Clusters are also emerging across the Federation in the regions and are spreading within federal districts in waves.

Figure 1. Pensioner Prevalence and Availability of Doctors

Regional governments acknowledge the trade-off between economic activities and anti-COVID-19 measures. While many economists [agree](#) that Russia is well-positioned to manage the pandemic's economic fallout and falling oil prices, the effects will vary across regions depending on the threat and capacity to treat the virus. In **Figure 1**, we demonstrate the relationship between the 2017 [pensioner population](#) (measuring regional vulnerability to the virus) and the 2019 [availability of doctors](#) (measuring regional capacity to respond). The figure shows that there is a trade-off for some regions based on these factors with the highest threat in the upper right quadrant.

In an article, Meduza [uses](#) open-source data to demonstrate that the availability of ventilators also varies regionally. There is considerable overlap between regions with high pensioner populations and low ventilator and doctor availability. At the same time, new data demonstrate that the magnitude of the crisis might be greater in small cities and rural areas as resources are [concentrated](#) in large urban areas.

Driven by this variation, three distinctions are emerging across regional responses to COVID-19 as governors respond to opportunities to innovate and provide effective leadership. The first distinction is embodied by the timing and level of self-isolation and subsequent decision to relax restrictions. Only 14 regions [adopted](#) strict self-isolation practices such as domestic travel prohibitions and shuttered public transportation services, according to *Vedomosti* on April 7. Other regions quickly relaxed regulations or opted against enforcing them, ended self-isolation early, or expanded the list of essential enterprises. As we reiterate below, tracking the effects of these decisions going forward

provides a complex but critical research program to understand the economic cost of the pandemic in Russia.

The second focus of regional response centers on support for vulnerable citizens. Regional governors will have to engage with the public, grassroots organizations, and potential collective action on the part of the groups most affected by the crisis, especially politically engaged pensioners. Certain activist governors are already using their autonomy to insulate themselves against shifts in popular opinion. [Veterans and the elderly](#) have been the subject of special attention as programs emerge to deliver food, medical supplies, and health information in Samara, Ulyanovsk, Moscow, and St. Petersburg—a trend that is probably more widespread. In some regions, both United Russia and the All-Union People’s Front are organizing these efforts. Notably, Primorsky Krai announced a jobs program for the unemployed. Given concerns about unemployment on social media, we expect these programs to become more common.

In addition, most activist governors are supporting private enterprise and SMEs through tax deferments, loans, and other supports. On April 8, Putin ordered the government to develop a national business support scheme, as business associations continued to press for state support. He also offered tax deferrals to small- and medium-sized enterprises for the next six months; they can now be repaid in installments over time. The most activist of the governors are amplifying these programs, although many are constrained by resources or capacity. Gleb Nikitin, governor of Nizhny Novgorod, advanced innovative [solutions](#) to support restaurants, hotels, and transport companies in the city by contracting with them to provide housing, food, and transport to medical workers concerned about endangering their families.

Figure 2. Regional Leaders’ Economic Risks and Capacity to Handle Them

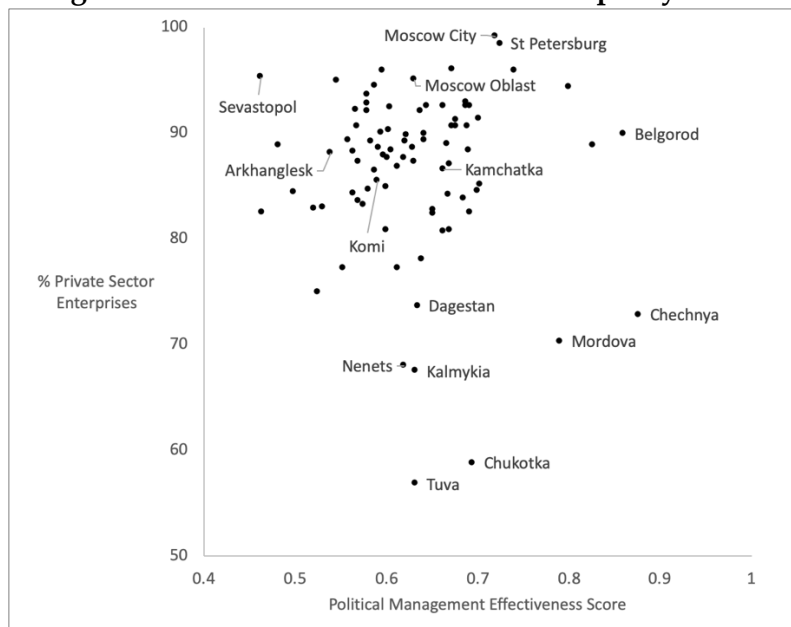


Figure 2 illustrates the trade-offs that regional leaders face in terms of economic risks and the capacity to meet them. The 2018 measure of [private enterprises](#) does not capture employment figures for each type of enterprise, but it does show the difference in potential dislocation—unemployment and lost revenue—in different regions. The March 2020 [effectiveness score](#) captures gubernatorial resources: popular support, elite unity, and ties to the center. The figure underscores trade-offs between regional challenges and governors’ capacities to respond, and identifies vulnerable leaders.

These factors come together when we consider longer-term trade-offs between the restrictive measures aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19 and the measures that mitigate the economic and social fall-out at the regional and national levels. At a March 30 meeting with presidential envoys in the federal districts, Putin [asked](#) the regions to prepare lists of vital enterprises. These enterprises will maintain operations to ensure employment and social stability. They are also more likely to be sustained by governmental support through subsidized credits, investment plans, and other types of assistance.

Although the governors have more responsibility, the federal “leash” is still in place. At the April 8 meeting with regional leaders, Putin criticized regions such as Karelia where the authorities closed most enterprises. He instructed governors to prepare for a gradual return to normal economic activity. Governors in the Far Eastern Federal District—Amur and Khabarovsk—responded quickly, and many businesses and government service centers reopened a few days later. In Saiansk, a city in Irkutsk oblast, Mayor Oleg Borovsky re-opened the city’s service industry on April 3, prompting the city procuracy to contest his decision because it contravened the presidential order. Borovsky received nationwide recognition as a defender of business after being [interviewed](#) on Channel 1.

In contrast, Primorsky Krai, Sakhalin, and Sakha maintained and even strengthened restrictions. Moscow Mayor Sobyenin also tightened restrictions, introducing a system of electronic passes for residents; such passes were adopted earlier in the Republic of Tatarstan and Nizhny Novgorod.

The Blame Game and the Potential Rise of New Leadership?

Since the early 2000s, “if not Putin, then who” has been the slogan of Russian elections, signaling the lack of credible alternative candidates and resigning Russians to the choice of “stability” embodied in this singular choice. A key element of this “if not Putin” strategy has been the elimination of a meritocratic ladder of political ambition that allows competent and popular leaders at lower levels of government to rise to power. As part of this process, many incumbent governors (some considered as regional heavyweights) have been replaced with technocrats and managers who focus on efficiency and policy implementation rather than politics. Charismatic regional and city leaders are quickly eliminated.

Nonetheless, the Levada Center [reports](#) that on average regional governors are as popular as Putin, although individual governors' ratings vary. Popularity will be a factor in the blame game, as the toll of the virus and its economic costs mount. Governors unable to maintain social stability in their regions are likely to be dismissed. The Kremlin's first actions removed three unpopular governors in [Komi, Arkhangelsk](#), and Kamchatka. These regions are also some of the most vulnerable, as depicted in the figures above. For governors, loyalty and effectiveness is a mixed blessing. The successful governor of Nenets autonomous oblast took the helm of Arkhangelsk.

This strategy of devolution in response to COVID-19 and the Kremlin's early response undercuts the present model of personalist leadership in Russia. For a brief period, Putin was largely absent and appeared irrelevant despite television appearances promising mortgage and loan repayment extensions, meeting with health officials, and providing directives to regional officials. As Vladimir Gel'man [argues](#), this may be a strategy to evade blame for outcomes of the virus, but many observers have [speculated](#) about longer-term reputational effects.

This dynamic played out as Putin appointed Sobyenin to chair the pandemic's National Task Force. As a former governor of the Tyumen region, Sobyenin recognizes the regional factors in crisis decision-making, but as **Figure 2** illustrates, he also faces significant challenges in pulling Moscow through the challenge. Sobyenin, and not Putin, [ordered](#) many of the significant restrictions on social interaction and economic activity to slow the spread of the virus. In doing so, Sobyenin assumed his place as a national leader and solidified his position as the presumptive second in command, but he is also vulnerable to blame-shifting. It remains to be seen if these strategies insulate the president and his government or exacerbate the decline in popular trust in government and leadership that has intensified over the past year.

Conclusion

In the face of the pandemic, the Kremlin faces a whirlwind of systemic pressures that are likely to grow in the coming months. The government undoubtedly will leverage its economic, institutional, and media resources to stabilize the system. Anti-crisis measures are likely to reinforce the social agenda Putin announced in his January 2020 annual address to the Federal Assembly. Limited measures mitigating social crisis and a stimulus package following Western examples are being crafted now. Anticipating 2021 parliamentary elections, the Russian parliament and United Russia are also now engaged in developing this policy response.

By the time Russia re-emerges from the crisis, however, the foundation of the system might be significantly different, although the overall framework could look the same. The effects of the pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis are revealing the social and economic vulnerability of the population and the hollowness of the regime's achievements (which were declared by Putin in his 2020 address to the Federal Assembly.) The level and form of new crisis-related information and its effect on popular

attitudes will vary across Russia and will be dependent on regional governments' responses and grassroots efforts that shape the economic and social impacts of the virus. The confluence of political, economic, and healthcare crises will almost certainly amplify trends of increased distrust in government institutions and central leadership. The regional variation in these trends and the effectiveness of governors' policies in response to mounting problems will define the extent of the challenge to the regime.

Ukraine Rides High While COVID-19 Lays Neighbors Low BUT FOR HOW LONG?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 652

May 2020

By Ivan Gomza¹

Kyiv School of Economics

When compared to other post-Soviet countries, Ukraine seems to have responded to the COVID-19 challenge quite well. However, this might be an illusion. There has been massive underreporting and the disease initially struck sparsely populated rural areas, leading many citizens to perceive that isolation measures are an unnecessary threat to their livelihood. But now, the virus is no longer contained in the countryside and it has exacerbated tensions between authorities at different levels. To compound the challenge, Ukraine's healthcare system is turbulent. Doctors and nurses are becoming ill and an identification, isolation, and tracing strategy is missing. Meanwhile, the government has been hatching plans to terminate the quarantine, even while neighboring Belarus and Russia are increasingly infiltrated by the virus. The Zelensky government has navigated the crisis so far, but seems to have deflected blame a little too far toward the fairly recently departed prime and health ministers. Ukraine's place in the current-but-changing COVID-19 [rankings](#) is fortunate positioning, especially if one considers the dismal deterioration of Russia and Belarus, with whom it shares many post-Soviet institutional and infrastructural frameworks. The Ukraine scenario looks like a recipe for a disaster and this is not a time for nonchalance.

Reasons for Being Unreasonable

The COVID-19 pandemic is perceived as a distant threat by half of Ukrainians. When they face the choice between the small likelihood of catching the disease and sacrificing their economic activities, or skipping a pleasant spring afternoon stroll, many are eager to take their chances. A recent Rating Group [poll](#) on public opinion in Ukraine reveals that 87 percent of respondents believe that the virus threat is tangible for Ukraine in general, but only 51 percent believe it poses a personal danger.

Apart from counting people strolling down Kyiv's central Khreshchatyk Avenue on an early springtime weekend—though it may be a surprisingly relevant social scientific

¹ [Ivan Gomza](#) is Research Professor of Public Policy and Governance at the Kyiv School of Economics. Some notions presented here stem from discussions with Volodymyr Dubovyk at Mechnikov National University, Odessa.

indicator—there are ways of measuring whether or not Ukrainians are following social isolation requirements. The leading mobile phone operator Kyivstar [estimated](#) that only half of residents in Ivano-Frankivsk, a regional capital in western Ukraine, are staying at home. This sounds low, but in fact, Ivano-Frankivsk is a champion in this regard. In other regional capitals, as few as 10 percent of people have been complying with quarantine regulations. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal has [acknowledged](#) that up to 70 percent of the population continues to go to work despite the quarantine.

Social isolation is circumvented not only by the populace but by the political class. It was [revealed](#) that a high-end restaurant owned by a member of the parliament (from the ruling “Servant of the People” party) has been operational despite the explicit governmental decree that such establishments must not function during the outbreak.

It Came from the West, Not the East

The cavalier attitude toward the pandemic has some rationality. The viral hazard is perceived as insignificant due to a constellation of luck and administrative measures. However, the former is running out and the latter is less and less effective. A combination of two auspicious, lucky features initially inhibited the spread of the disease in Ukraine: the direction of international migration and the degree of urbanization. Since China was the original disease incubator, the dispersion trajectory of the virus was contingent upon visitors to the “Middle Kingdom” carrying it back to their homelands. However, both Ukrainian tourists and labor migrants prefer other destinations; according to [official data](#), there were only 540 Ukrainians in China when the crisis began, including, however, [53](#) in Wuhan.

Furthermore, the spatial clustering of Ukrainian urban areas initially halted the viral spread. Although the degree of Ukrainian urbanization reaches [70 percent](#)—Ukraine equals Italy in this respect—urban areas are much more dispersed. Moreover, three out of four of the most [afflicted regions](#) in Ukraine—Chernivtsi (at time of writing, 2,388 reported cases), Ivano-Frankivsk (1,361 reported cases), and Ternopil (1,020 reported cases)—belong to the *least* urbanized regions.

Migratory routes are also responsible for Ukraine’s trends. All three regions have a considerable chunk of the population that works in the EU. As COVID-19 engulfed Italy and Spain, these migrants returned home. Thus, the coronavirus penetrated Ukraine not from the East, but the West. Since the Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Ternopil regions are predominantly rural, the migrants in question returned to their villages, some being infected. Still, the virus was effectively contained in remote areas because it was not able to spread easily between the localized sites of infection.

Migratory trends and urban clustering only temporarily managed to halt the spread of the virus. A consistent and vigorous policy is a prerequisite for eradicating the threat. Ukraine was among the first East European nations to opt for closing borders and limiting the internal movement of people. Besides, the early suspension of educational

and business activities contributed to lessening the chances for schools, universities, restaurants, and shopping malls to serve as viral breeding-grounds. These policies all helped to prevent the rapid transmission of the disease throughout the country. However, these early achievements must not be interpreted over-optimistically.

The Lull Before the Storm?

Four factors make Ukraine's responses to the COVID-19 crisis less impressive than they may appear to be at first glance. First, the virus is no longer contained in predominantly rural areas. The single [most afflicted region](#) now is the city of Kyiv (at the time of writing, 1,978 reported cases), alongside its highly urbanized and tightly clustered metropolitan area (976 reported cases). The virus has now been feeding on 5 million individuals as potential hosts in the center of the country. Political paralysis is not out of question either. Several parliamentarians have been [infected](#) and the body is using virtual procedures for sessions.

Second, quarantine measures are highly detrimental to the national economy. In Ukraine, many workers are private contractors or run small businesses. By suspending their work, they have no income. According to a [poll](#) this past April, 55 percent of respondents said that they only had enough savings for a month of subsistence. According to some [estimations](#), 1 million people have lost their incomes. Official data suggest that since the quarantine was imposed, unemployed [has risen](#) by 148,000, which is 48 percent higher than it was in the spring of 2019. The impact of the quarantine upon the national economy and people's private lives will be immense. This is partly why people tend to ignore the threat and keep on working. The hasty Ukrainian government [decisions](#) to ease quarantine regulations and allow businesses to operate from May 11 is an attempt to lessen the negative economic impact caused by the pandemic—just as is the case in many other European countries.

Third, the quarantine has exacerbated political tensions. This is primarily manifested by popular mobilization and a confrontation between local and national authorities. Although mass rallies are effectively banned under the quarantine regime, in the last week of April, citizens in the capital organized several pickets around the [presidential office](#) and the [parliament](#). There were also protests in the regions. People demanded that food markets and industries and businesses be opened. Under popular pressure, some local authorities decided to terminate their quarantines ahead of any governmental decrees on the matter. An example is Cherkasy whose mayor had permitted small businesses to re-open on [May 1](#). This decision [enraged](#) President Volodymyr Zelensky and Minister of Interior Arsen Avakov, who launched an [official investigation](#) into the mayor's actions. In response, the mayor [argued](#) that the economic idleness had provoked a serious fiscal crisis in his city. Such attitudes are not rare and should be taken into account by the national authorities provoking them to be more responsive. A similar story happened in the regional capital of [Dnipro](#), a city of one million, as well as in several smaller towns. The fact that after only a short time of such domestic confrontation the national government opted to lift quarantine measures, indicates its

lack of capacity to enforce its own rulings nation-wide. Not long ago, despite governmental prohibitions, people attended Easter services, did not wear masks, and those who returned from abroad were often ignored by healthcare officials.

Finally, to compound all challenges, the healthcare system in Ukraine suffers from dysfunctionality. Between August 2019 and March 2020, the Ministry of Public Health held a game of musical chairs with four different people serving as head; three of them had to deal directly with the COVID-19 crisis. But the lack of continuity in the head office is not the only issue. For instance, Ukraine has the highest [ratio](#) of hospital beds per person in Europe, and the state allocates financing to them according to this number and not for actual medical procedures performed (doctor-patient care). Ukraine's current healthcare reforms aim to change this and financially award practitioners who actually work with patients rather than on (empty) bed numbers. However, somewhat tragically, this much-needed optimization goes contrary to COVID-19 provisions, which require more doctors, generalists, and specialists—and more beds. Also, one-fifth of medical personnel are [estimated](#) to already be infected.

When these features are combined with continental trends, Ukraine's reaction to the crisis demands a re-evaluation. By mid-May 2020, at the time of this publication, the focal point of COVID-19 had shifted [eastward](#), toward Belarus and Russia. Ukraine is situated in the epicenter of this wave. However, Ukrainian healthcare officials are performing the [fewest](#) COVID-19 tests in Europe. The Minister of Health [acknowledged](#) that the government cannot afford broad testing programs.

Therefore, underreporting is at least partially responsible for the low rate of diagnosed cases. This is only the tip of the iceberg because without proper testing, effective identification and isolation of infected individuals is unfeasible. Meanwhile, citizens, after two-months of idleness and pecuniary losses, are eager to resume their economic and leisure activities. For its part, the government has been unable to enforce strict quarantines and actually sought to loosen regulations by way of [claims](#) made by Shmyhal on May 12 that the country appears to be at the peak of the spread of the disease.

Consequences

The political repercussions of COVID-19-crisis mismanagement are bound to be significant. Since the introduction of the quarantine, the Zelensky regime—despite criticism by some professionals and political opponents—managed not to alienate its core constituency. Despite some decline in public support, Zelensky still holds a comfortable [position](#) as the most positively perceived politician. Moreover, another public [poll](#) reveals peculiar doublethink: Ukrainians fear that the situation around the coronavirus is deteriorating but 61 percent remain convinced that the regime is dealing with the COVID-19 challenge “in the best possible way.” It is arguable that Zelensky personally benefited from the reshuffling of the government in early March 2020, thereby shifting discontent to ex-Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk and his team.

Likewise, blaming one's predecessor is the preferable strategy concerning the miserable healthcare situation. The head of the system, Uliana Suprun, left office nine months before the arrival of the virus in Ukraine, but she received sole attribution for the system's deficiencies. Capitalizing on popular discontent with Suprun, the regime even decided to readjust healthcare reform.

In short, the Zelensky regime passed unscathed through the first phase of the epidemic. However, since the country is being unevenly touched by the disease, some regional authorities deem the quarantine measures too timid while others say it is too harsh. This will have political effects revealed in the next local elections scheduled for October 2020. If the situation deteriorates, the political regime responses will more closely be criticized.

COVID-19 Implications for Azerbaijan

MOMENTUM IMMOBILIZED BY A PERFECT STORM

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 686

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Anar Valiyev¹

ADA University, Azerbaijan

Global events related to the COVID-19 pandemic have affected all countries in Central Eurasia, with many experiencing signs of recession in late 2020. The forced quarantine regimes and economic downturns challenged or accelerated the downfall of governance systems, revealing long-standing structural problems across the region. The crisis is unique, and some of these countries have never experienced such economic shifts since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, this time, major global players like China, the EU, and the United States have been struggling with their own crises and can only offer modest assistance.

Azerbaijan, in comparison with other countries in the region, was in good condition at the beginning of 2020. It had recovered from the 2015 economic [crisis](#), held necessary exchange reserves, and the IMF promised economic growth. Azerbaijan was expecting to launch a gas pipeline to Europe and fully utilize the Belt and Road Initiative. The regime held early parliamentary elections in February 2020 that gave a landslide victory to the government party and young pro-government MPs. Then, one month later, Azerbaijan was shut down. The national economy, heavily dependent on oil and gas resources, was reduced, alongside a record drop in oil and gas prices. The government found itself in a difficult situation and has been cost-cutting without new sources of revenue in sight. With few good options, policymakers in Baku may look toward Brussels for cooperative and investment opportunities while pressure will rise domestically as the population seeks more social and economic services. Governmental efforts to reconstruct de-occupied territories in Karabakh will divert significant funds. Azerbaijan would also need the involvement of the United States (and EU) and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank for expanding political and economic development.

Institutional Improvements and Implications

¹ [Anar Valiyev](#) is Associate Professor at ADA University, Baku, Azerbaijan.

Over the past few years, Azerbaijan initiated several structural reforms that significantly improved the quality of some of its institutions. There has been considerable adoption of technology and e-governance in the delivery of public services. Reforms were introduced in the justice and health care systems, replacing old, Soviet-type processes. The main purpose was to optimize the public administration system, cut the cost of the public sector wage bill, and reinvigorate some personnel in key positions—all with the aim of some economic and social liberalization. However, the pandemic stopped these initiatives, and key areas of the economy and social system were drastically affected.

On March 19, 2020, the president signed an executive order to protect public health and strengthen countermeasures against infection. The order focused on macroeconomic stability, employment, and entrepreneurship. The “Action Plan” included large-scale, effective, and efficient measures, accompanied by \$2 billion.

When the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized COVID-19 as a pandemic, the government closed all educational institutions—over two million students at various levels stayed home. All primary and secondary schools did not have any online teaching capability, but due to the Azerbaijani government’s strategic partnership with Microsoft, all education institutions were able to use Microsoft Teams for free. (This solved the problem of outreach but did not help improve quality.)

The healthcare system was one of the hardest-hit areas. The year 2020 was supposed to be the year of significant reforms in the sector, with the government planning to liquidate the remnants of the Soviet system and move toward mandatory health insurance. An agency was created for this purpose, TABIB, but plans were halted. The new emergency led to 35 hospitals designated for treating COVID-19 cases. Last fall, the daily rate hit 4,000 cases, leading to serious supply issues nonetheless. And the unprecedented scale of the escalation of the Karabakh conflict added complexity to the response as it burdened the health system. Despite the high capacity of beds (relatively speaking), by November of 2020, the number of infected reached around 90,000 people, which was far above available resources.

Political Implications

Tectonic, paradigmatic shifts happening in international relations did not avoid Azerbaijan. The country is located between three regional superpowers that were hit most by COVID-19—Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Adding fuel to the fire, on September 27, Azerbaijan and Armenia became embroiled in a 44-day-long military conflict that led to the destruction of Armenian and Karabakh-Armenian forces, the de-occupation of Azerbaijani territories adjacent to Karabakh, and Baku in control of about half Karabakh. According to a joint [statement](#) by the heads of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia signed on November 9, the two sides should remain in their positions and stop hostilities while Russian peacekeepers locate themselves on the line of contact. Armenia also agreed to de-occupy other territories (Agdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin). The war claimed around 3,000 lives on both sides in the bloodiest clash between the two since 1994.

Azerbaijan was able to regain control of a portion of its occupied territories and start returning displaced people to their lands. Russia has gained a foothold in Azerbaijan, and the Russian military, in the form of peacekeepers, returned to Azerbaijan after 28 years of absence. These Russian peacekeepers represent the real power on the ground controlled by Karabakh-Armenians, while Turkey has become involved in a joint monitoring center together with Russian troops. Such an arrangement indicates that Moscow and Ankara may revive a type of initiative that was explored back in the time of the Russian-Georgian crisis of 2008.

The Russia+Armenia versus Turkey+Azerbaijan scheme has been spelled-out often and has been a way to check the international community's attitude toward the conflict. Such a platform would allow Russia and Turkey to become guarantors of any future peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, it could be problematic due to Armenian distrust of Turkish plans in the Caucasus as well as sharp Ankara-Moscow controversies in other dimensions and parts of the world. In any case, the Karabakh conflict was solved semi-successfully for Azerbaijan. Many questions remain unanswered, however, especially about the co-existence of Azerbaijani and Armenian communities, the status of the Russian peacekeepers, and the return of Azerbaijani IDPs to Karabakh. The Azerbaijani government will need to use other strategies in dealing now with not only Armenia but also an assertive Russia. Moreover, Baku hopes that Turkish involvement in the conflict would not turn Karabakh into a "South Ossetia" that might receive recognition of independence (by Russia and others) as per a grand conception by Karabakh-Armenians.

Economic Implications

On the economic front, the slump in oil prices along with the spread of pandemic-preventive policies decreased the value of oil exports drastically and doubled the negative impact of COVID-19. Henceforth, to understand the magnitude of the impact of the pandemic on the economy, one needs to consider the country's structural deficiencies. Low income-generating capacity, spatial inequalities in the access to public services, and weak institutional capacity are consequences of the oil dependence of the Azerbaijani economy over decades. This challenges the fight against the pandemic because the population is in an economically vulnerable situation.

The volatility in the energy market began to impact the economy as early as February 2020. In 2019, roughly 40 percent of GDP was produced by the mining sector, and around 92 percent of exports were mineral products. The non-oil sector of the country is not powerful enough to substitute for the oil one. There has been relative deindustrialization happening since the 1990s and significant expansion of the non-tradable sector. In the absence of a well-functioning manufacturing sector and diversified exports, the negative oil price shocks hit the economy severely, endangering sustainable economic growth (as was the case in 2015). The country's non-oil sector, which had been the pride of the government for the last five years, became frozen, especially the tourism industry, the

hotel business, entertainment, and trade. The imposed quarantine regime from March to December restricted tourism and had ongoing, negative effects on small and medium enterprises and retail and hospitality businesses. Consumer purchasing power drastically dropped.

It was expected that around 35 percent of GDP would be generated from oil while 65 percent would come from the non-oil sector. This goal now appears impossible to reach, and the government would need to increase investments in the domestic market to stimulate business. As mentioned earlier, the government allocated about \$2 billion for economic/business/worker livelihood, along with increased public health spending. But all of the highest growth sectors (tourism, retail, food, technology, communications) have been hit badly, which has also cut off important economic spillover benefits into associated sectors.

Needless to say, several barriers have already been in place for foreign capital and private-sector driven growth; institutional and bureaucratic hurdles impact potential. The labor force in Azerbaijan is not qualified enough to produce goods that are competitive in the global market. The limited national market does not allow big investors to open new ventures in the country. A lack of access to an ocean and cheap, sea-based transport routes makes Azerbaijan a rather undesirable destination for foreign direct investment from an export-market perspective. Additional factors that limit foreign investment in the country are the country's non-accession to the WTO and the absence of a clear plan for joining. Non-accession allows rules and regulations to remain vague, forcing foreign investors to depend on official public decisions. Last but not least, unreliable geopolitics disturb the region, as the country's three neighbors are under full or partial sanctions.

Beyond Implications

The prevalent challenge for the country is an ambiguous vision of development. Despite the adoption of several "road maps," the actions of the government over the last three years have not decreased Azerbaijan's dependence on the carbon economy. As a result, Baku may face serious financial problems in the near future. To fulfill its commitments to expand oil and gas development in the region, including the SOCAR-backed TANAP (Trans-Anatolian) and TAP (Trans-Adriatic) pipeline projects, the government is in dire need of massive investments. The burden of reconstruction of de-occupied Karabakh puts additional pressure on the financial system. The Oil Fund is the only mechanism that can stabilize the financial situation, but it has limits.

What specifically can Azerbaijan expect post-COVID-19 in terms of other projects? The plan of being a transportation hub is still [feasible](#). Considering global security threats such as political turmoil, piracy, and maritime complications, Azerbaijan could still have a role on a trade-transportation corridor involving China, India, ASEAN states, and Central Asia. Beyond favorable geographical conditions, however, it would need some kind of support from the EU and United States. Furthermore, ongoing negotiations between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia on "reconnections" between Azerbaijan and

Turkey via Armenia, as well as Yerevan and Moscow via Baku, might unlock such passages if they have global potential.

We can expect that long-awaited benefits from the Belt and Road Initiative will be postponed. Even though China may have a fast, post-COVID recovery, its ambitious transcontinental project will probably lag. Beijing will divert resources toward domestic consumption and recovery, resulting in slowing Chinese penetration in the region and a downgrading of most of its projects. The Russian-led North-South transportation project intending to connect Indian with Northern Europe through Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia will also receive a huge blow due to lower demand and the diversion of financial resources inward. Thus, Azerbaijan may come to rely more on the EU, and its support, in turn, would bring Baku closer to Brussels.

Conclusion

The impact and consequences of COVID-19 are not fully felt by society or the political establishment—thanks so far to Azerbaijan’s national reserves. With limited income-generating abilities, the population will mount pressure on the government to spend more on social and economic programs. The government, however, will find itself cutting costs in public administration. Probably, some economic and administrative changes may occur in order for state structures to further optimize. Some analysts expect massive privatization of state enterprises to occur, which would impact the economic situation (hard to tell which way). From an international standpoint, slow gravitation toward the EU may unfold, especially with Baku’s heavy reliance on cash from gas from European consumers. That, in turn, would force Moscow to use all of its methods to keep Baku in its wider orbit, especially taking into consideration the Karabakh dynamics and presence of Russian peacekeepers in Azerbaijan. Turkey’s role and influence have significantly increased in the country and are expected to grow (to counterbalance Russian pressure). One way or another, the pandemic will significantly change relations between Azerbaijan and the traditional great powers in the region.

The Pandemic in the Arctic

COMMON CHALLENGES FROM JUNEAU TO MURMANSK

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Robert Orttung¹

George Washington University

In addition to the obvious healthcare and economic challenges that COVID-19 presents to city governments in the Arctic region, it is also a communications and governance crisis. Accomplishing any task in Arctic cities is particularly complicated due to the specific conditions of the region. In particular, Arctic populations must contend with sheer remoteness, extreme cold, a rapidly changing climate, insufficient medical and infrastructure facilities, and heavily resource-based economies. To respond effectively, city leaders need to coordinate an integrated response that cuts across all sectors of urban life such as retail, dining, transportation, and education. In the face of federal inaction in Russia and the United States, local authorities from Murmansk to Juneau have had to take the lead in keeping their populations safe. An ability to deliver effective communications that encourage trust has been the main driver in both cases.

Balancing Economics and Health

For the Arctic region, like elsewhere, the key to surviving the pandemic is balancing health concerns with the need to keep the economy moving forward. The most natural strategy for the remote, poorly resourced Arctic cities is keeping the virus out by minimizing the number of outsiders coming into the region. Since there are only a limited number of hospital beds and physicians in the far north, the main pandemic response seemed to be prioritizing medical advice to limit interactions.

This strategy was especially important since the Arctic countries number among those with the most cases in the world, including the United States, Russia, and Sweden (where the initial response to the pandemic allowed more spread than in neighboring Scandinavian countries). While the northern regions of Russia and the United States seemed to fare better than the other parts of their countries, at least initially, they could not avoid infections.

¹ [Robert Orttung](#) is Research Professor of International Affairs, IERES, and Director of Research, Sustainable GW, at the George Washington University. *Acknowledgement:* This report draws on information and analyses developed with the support of U.S. National Science Foundation Award #2028348.

Russia's Arctic cities have some advantages over their Western counterparts, including the fact that they have more physicians per capita than similar cities in the far north in the West. Among their disadvantages, though, is that the Russian cities are much more compact than their Western counterparts. While this feature of urban design can be useful in reducing energy use per capita and making it easier to operate public transportation, in times of the pandemic, the closer living quarters can facilitate the spread of the virus among the population.

For Russia, the main source of the spread was workers arriving from outside the Arctic to work on the region's burgeoning fossil fuel exploitation sites. The most important of these included the [Kola Yard](#) construction site in Belokamenka (Murmansk Oblast) focused on natural gas, the [Chayanda oil field](#) (Sakha Republic), and the [Olympiadinskaya gold mine](#) (Krasnoyarsky Krai). Reports from family members of workers employed at Kola Yard said that Novatek, the firm operating the site, failed to provide adequate personal protective equipment and the workers lived in crowded dormitories during their stay at the site. Problems at the construction center drove the first round of infections in Murmansk Oblast.

In Juneau, the main source of infection seemed to be people celebrating in bars on the 4th of July. One worker then spread the virus to his colleagues at a nearby seafood-processing plant, leading to a large outbreak. Once the virus arrived, working conditions in the plant facilitated its spread. While the resource-based companies were the source of problems at first in both Russia and Alaska, they have more recently seen a rise in cases driven by a more general community spread.

Regional Governments on Their Own

In both Russia and the United States, federal leaders largely ducked responsibility for addressing the crisis. Rather than developing a coherent and unified national response, they passed on these tasks to regional and local leaders to make their own policies in dealing with the situation. The result in both countries was a patchwork of efforts, with some regions doing better than others.

In the absence of an effective national policy, the key to responding successfully to the pandemic in Arctic conditions requires integrative leadership at the city level that is able to coordinate and implement policies across a wide range of areas. Our analysis of the initial COVID-19 response in Juneau, Alaska, found that this kind of response was crucial in keeping the number of cases low. Juneau has a relatively weak mayor, strong city manager, and a nine-member city assembly. The city has significant advantages in its efforts to manage the crisis because it owned the local airport and hospital and worked closely with the school system.

Nevertheless, despite this comprehensive system, the city authorities wished that they had been better able to coordinate the local response. Allowing some operations at local restaurants and bars undermined the ability of the school system to open to in-person

teaching. And, despite the common ownership structure, both the hospital and airport had interests that did not always coincide with the comprehensive pandemic response. The hospital needed to protect its bottom line at a time when the pandemic had prevented it from engaging in many money-making activities while the airport sought to provide continuing travel services.

In the city of Murmansk, there is a strong city manager, weak mayor, and 30-member city council. With local power concentrated in the hands of city leaders and close ties with the regional governor, the structural foundations exist to develop more integrated policies. But Russia's city governments are much less representative of their populations since they rely largely on appointments from above and controlled access to the ballot, which eliminates candidates whom the authorities do not support. The result is that the population has little trust in their leaders.

Russia's system is designed to subordinate the local authorities to the governor as part of the power vertical that ultimately reaches up to the Kremlin. Nevertheless, even though Murmansk's city manager is appointed from above, in order to rule effectively he must be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of his policies and build support for them among the local elites and the broader public. Developing this kind of buy-in is extremely difficult in both democratic and authoritarian systems.

Communications

Central to providing integrative governance during the pandemic is the authorities' ability to communicate with their audiences. The key here is changing behaviors. Doing that naturally requires that the citizens trust the communications that they are receiving. Given the declining lack of trust in traditional institutions around the world, city leaders both in Russia and the West faced considerable challenges in getting their message out and ensuring that the audience not only hears it but takes action in response.

Research on emergency communications from government authorities has a long history. Since the 1950s, when Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld published their classic [*Personal Influence*](#), it has been clear that the power of a message from the authorities to their citizens is often influenced by how a person's friends, neighbors, and social networks interpret that message and whether they support it or not. [Ongoing research](#) continues to build on those insights, expanding them to include consideration of social media and applying them to conditions of disaster response. Today's messages from the authorities are mediated by the lens of social media as well as in-person networks, making the state communicators' job even more complicated than in the past.

At the same time, considerable research demonstrates that there is less trust in the traditional media both in authoritarian and democratic systems. Russians have been shifting their information consumption habits away from state-controlled television channels to freer sites that are available on the internet. The same is happening in the

United States as citizens are less willing to believe what they hear from traditional news sources and increasingly seek out information from other places.

Local Arctic governments have responded to these changing patterns in information consumption by seeking to communicate directly with audiences. Murmansk Oblast authorities created an [online data portal](#) to present clear information about the number of cases and deaths in the region. While there is certainly reason to doubt the accuracy of the numbers posted online, the portal at least gave a sense of what the authorities saw as the main problem. For example, in late August, the portal provided the numbers of people infected at the Belokamenska construction site as well as in the Oblast as a whole. Viewed on November 28, the site showed a rapid increase in cases since the end of the summer, with the number of infected more than doubling. While the portal still showed the number of cases from the construction site, it was clear that this location was no longer the main driver of infection in the region and that other sources had surpassed it.

Alaskan cities like Juneau had similar sites with similar statistics marking the progress of the pandemic and the alarming increase of cases in the fall. Juneau had also invested in producing a variety of informational flyers that city workers had posted around town to get the authorities' message out.

In both Russia and the United States., city managers sought as many avenues for communicating directly with their constituents as possible. For example, Murmansk City Manager Yevgeny Nikora included a profile picture of himself on Facebook with a mask, sending the message that he supported such protective efforts.

In Juneau, the city manager addressed the population each morning on the radio with a 10-minute update about the situation and what needed to be done in response. These addresses proved popular with the citizenry, giving them a reliable sense of what was happening and the feeling that someone was in charge and taking necessary action to protect public safety. Juneau saw the importance of communications from the very beginning of the pandemic. As early as March, when the shutdowns first began, it increased its communications staff from half of a full-time employee to eight staff members working on getting messages out. This dramatic repurposing of personnel demonstrated how seriously the Juneau city and borough governments took the communication problems.

Indigenous Concerns

In both Russia and the United States, Indigenous communities often live in a parallel universe separate from the settler communities that have developed Arctic cities. Memories of the 1918 Spanish flu remain strong among Arctic Indigenous communities since the earlier pandemic had deadly consequences, and stories about its lethality were passed from generation to generation by community elders. Many of these groups are [vulnerable](#) to problems with the virus due to their even greater remoteness, limited social mobility, and narrow access to information and public services.

Typically, to protect themselves, the Indigenous communities sought isolation from settler communities by limiting access to their land. They continued with subsistence gathering of natural foods but suffered from a lack of economic contact with outsiders.

The situation of the Indigenous differs across the Arctic. In some cases in Alaska, Indigenous groups benefit heavily from local resource extraction and often have the resources to develop their own health care systems and coordinate their own response to hazards like the pandemic. In Russia, the government has frequently crushed autonomous Indigenous activity in coordination with its larger crackdown on non-governmental organizations. As Arbakhan Magomedov [argues](#), Northern Indigenous groups have started to advocate more effectively for their interests, but they have not yet been able to extract major concessions from the authorities.

Conclusion

A dangerous winter approaches. The early onset of cold and darkness in the north has only exacerbated the situation for regional and local leaders as cases have spiked to levels not seen since the beginning of the pandemic. As the growing caseload requires additional shutdowns, the economic impact is expected to grow. Increasingly, local leaders are looking to the federal government for additional economic assistance and support for both public and private sector operations. However, it is not clear that federal governments in either Russia or the United States are willing or able to provide the kind of aid that local leaders and citizens would like to see.

The ongoing pandemic and lack of outside financial support will provide a clear test for local resilience in parts of the countries already facing extreme conditions. As the spread of the virus increases toward the end of 2020, in addition to the usual cold, remoteness, and changing climate, city leaders will have to muster all of their resources to ensure that their constituents are able eventually to restore their accustomed lifestyles.

Part II.
COVID-19 as Foreign Policy Tool

Masked Diplomacy: Xi and Putin Seek Advantage and Cover from the Pandemic

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Elizabeth Wishnick¹
Montclair State University; Columbia University

In the United States, President Donald Trump claims to be a wartime president, while denying any responsibility as the country proved unprepared to confront its most serious health emergency in more than a century. American voters will soon have a chance to weigh in on his leadership. In China and Russia, however, we see [authoritarian](#) strongmen with an indefinite hold on power taking cover from bad news of the pandemic's impact on their countries while seeking to take advantage of disorganized global and regional responses to the pandemic for short-term political gain. Given the outstanding questions about the handling of the pandemic in both China and Russia, such strategies may backfire in the long term and raise questions about their role in regional integration strategies.

Where was Xi?

As the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have [originated](#) as early as mid-November 2019 in Wuhan, the Chinese government is now seen as seeking to take advantage of lagging global responses to [claim](#) global and regional leadership. Rather than a display of Chinese strength, efforts to reframe the country's role reveal an effort to shore up President Xi Jinping's [reputation](#) after Chinese authorities suffered unprecedented [criticism](#) for their own initial slow response and attacks on early whistleblowers.

During the first few weeks of January, Xi was nowhere to be seen. The Chinese president did not visit the virus epicenter, Wuhan, until March 10, as the disease appeared to be weakening in the area. To counter such narratives, on February 26, Xinhua [heralded](#) the publication of a new book about Xi's outstanding leadership during the pandemic. A French publication reported that Chinese embassies all over the world have been [tasked](#)

¹ [Elizabeth Wishnick](#) is Professor of Political Science at Montclair State University and Senior Research Scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University.

with refuting that the virus began in China and to claim instead that the true origin of the virus remains unknown.

Chinese news outlets and officials have put forth a variety of outlandish [origin stories](#), claiming that the virus began in Italy or was the product of a U.S. Army biological war attack. This led Chinese Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai to [criticize](#) such claims made by his colleagues at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, including spokesman Zhao Lijian, as “crazy” and “harmful.” All of this is occurring as Chinese officials gear up for the [rescheduled](#) opening sessions of their national legislature and a key advisory body, which may happen in late April or May. One of the reasons for the [initial delay](#) in reporting the outbreak of the virus in Wuhan may have been efforts by local officials to hide bad news prior to the January 12, 2020 opening of the provincial legislative session, a preparatory meeting for the national session.

Putin and Russia’s Response

China is not alone in spreading disinformation about the origins of the pandemic. According to an [EU report](#), Russia has been doing this as well, in keeping with its ongoing efforts to sow distrust in Europe and the United States. Conspiracy theories about U.S. responsibility for the virus are also [targeted](#) at Russian audiences to deflect blame in case the pandemic becomes more extensive at home. Like Xi, President Vladimir Putin sees the pandemic as a threat to his own personal power, which he has recently sought to institutionalize in an April 22 referendum (now postponed indefinitely) regarding constitutional changes extending his term as President. Just as Xi made Prime Minister Li Keqiang the face of China’s response, so has Putin largely [left it](#) to other officials, his Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, to manage the pandemic.

Russia [claims](#) to have relatively few cases (2,337 cases and 17 deaths [as of](#) March 31) and is only now taking serious steps to stem its spread. After the city of Moscow and the Moscow region announced a lockdown on March 30, [16 regions](#), mostly in European Russia, followed suit the same day. To enforce quarantines, [newly developed](#) facial recognition technology, widely used in China to identify regime opponents, has been deployed. Ironically, Chinese citizens were among the first to be targeted by Russian authorities using the technology, [leading](#) to official Chinese protests about discriminatory treatment of Chinese citizens in Russia. In February, the city of Zhengzhou, some 300 miles north of Wuhan, began [using](#) facial recognition gates and infrared temperature checks in all subway stations. A Chinese tech company has just developed the capability to [detect](#) faces even through masks (though the addition of sunglasses still vexes the system).

Experts claim that Russia has suspiciously [few](#) reported cases of COVID-19. There may be some [underreporting](#) in Russia, but other countries on China’s northern and western borders thus far have relatively few cases compared to other countries. All closed their borders to China without delay, strategic partnerships notwithstanding. While Central

Asian countries now are seeing increased cases of COVID-19, this is from the second wave of the pandemic, reflecting travel from Europe not from China. The Russian map of the spread of COVID-19 (see Figure 1) [shows](#) a concentration of cases in European Russia, not along the border with China.

Figure 1. Cases of Coronavirus in Russia



Source: [BBC](#) (screenshot), March 31, 2020; data: Russian Government Communication Center

The Pandemic and Regional Partnerships

Some analysts [project](#) that COVID-19 is likely to undermine the Sino-Russian partnership—in the Russian media, as in the White House, some refer to the pandemic as the “Chinese coronavirus.” Nonetheless, even on the pandemic response we see a familiar [pattern](#) in Sino-Russian relations: [mutual support](#) by Xi and Putin, contrasted with ambivalence in Russian regions, as some local authorities [target](#) Chinese nationals in enforcing quarantines, while others bemoan the [loss](#) of Chinese visitors. We see similar trends in [Kazakhstan](#) and [Mongolia](#), where top-level goodwill is maintained at the same time as trade is halted and quarantines are enforced.

Although Belt and Road projects have been [suspended](#) in Eurasia, China is only increasing its [leverage](#) on its key regional partners. The pandemic coincides with a dispute between Russia and Saudi Arabia over oil prices, further weakening the economies of resource-producing states like Russia and [Kazakhstan](#). Nonetheless, Russian officials and analysts now see the coronavirus as a [bigger threat](#) to the Russian economy than the decline in the price of oil. Putin has taken some initial steps to bolster the Russian economy but much depends on the length of the pandemic since [60 percent](#) of Russia’s trade is with Europe and China. Nonetheless, the Russian President has also capitalized on a disjointed response to the pandemic in Europe to show the Russian flag in Italy, sanctions notwithstanding. Russian sent nine planeloads of aid along with 100 troops, leading to criticism that Putin was playing “[viruspolitik](#).”

As China claims to see few new cases of COVID-19 (though [some dispute](#) Chinese figures), Chinese agencies and companies are now [offering assistance](#) to a number of affected countries. With train connections newly built for the Belt and Road now [idle](#), Xi

announced that 110,000 masks and 776 gowns would be sent to Spain by rail (taking 17 days). The Chinese leader now speaks of [“the health Silk Road”](#) connecting China with partners in the struggle against COVID-19. It remains to be seen what the long-term consequences of this outreach will be and its impact on China’s soft power in the future. In the immediate region, it is more likely that the experience with COVID-19 will make publics in Eurasia even more wary of regional connectivity than previously, creating a deeper disconnect between the messaging by the primarily authoritarian leaders and their more skeptical publics, who were already anxious about BRI projects leading to a greater influx of Chinese workers and leasing of property.

Conclusion

Rather than portending [a new Chinese effort](#) at global and regional leadership, COVID-19 reveals its absence and shows how poorly equipped global architecture is for 21st-century threats. No country or institution – not the United States, China, Russia, the UN, or the EU – has stepped up to craft a truly response that would provide a template for cooperative action and preventive measures for the health security crises of the future that are sure to come. Instead, the Chinese leadership, Putin’s government, the Trump administration, and others seek to assign blame to deflect attention from their own domestic shortfalls. China and Russia may seek to take advantage of a leadership vacuum, but they did not create it, nor do they have the soft power resources to overcome it. It is democracies in Asia like [South Korea and Taiwan](#) who are to be emulated, as their strategies to contain COVID-19 proved effective as well as commensurate with democratic ideals of transparency and accountability.

Under the Cover of COVID-19

REVERSE IRREDENTISM RISING IN EAST UKRAINE’S “PEOPLE’S REPUBLICS”

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 657
June 2020

Mikhail Alexseev¹
San Diego State University

With the spread of COVID-19 to Europe, policy patterns in the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR/LNR) indicate that these “separatist entities,” which Moscow engineered in 2014 to crush Ukraine’s EU and NATO aspirations, have increasingly pushed for joining Russia. This is a case of coronavirus-facilitated reverse irredentism—when a smaller entity that is part of one state seeks to merge with a neighboring state. The military force, policies, laws, and official statements from those areas imply that Moscow will remain the principal (and stronger) driver of the ongoing Donbas war. Conflict resolution will hinge on the Kremlin’s broader geopolitical ambitions, capacities, and constraints, rather than on: 1) the popular will on either side of the frontlines, 2) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s dogged peace efforts, 3) international diplomacy, or 4) putative dialogue between Kyiv and the DNR/LNR. All the while, the broad handling of the pandemic appears to be contributing the effect of drawing the entities toward Russia.

Pandemics as Analytical Prisms

With the acute sense of existential and group threat rising, crises crystalize identity—particularly where group identities are in flux choices (as a new thirty-six-author [inter-disciplinary analysis](#) reminds us). Therefore, one would justifiably expect COVID-19 responses in contested entities such as DNR/LNR to be particularly revealing of their leaders’ preferences and the very nature of political authority.

The specific question in this context is with whom the DNR/LNR leaders prefer to form collective identity and link their fate facing COVID-19. The key options are reintegration into Ukraine, independence (separatism), or joining Russia (reverse irredentism). These options are not new, but the pandemic raised the urgency to clarify choices.

¹ [Mikhail Alexseev](#) is the Bruce E. Porteous Professor of Political Science at San Diego State University.

Reintegration into Ukraine: Incentives Ignored

The pandemic, particularly toward the end of March 2020, arguably boosted two powerful incentives for the DNR/LNR reintegration into Ukraine: socioeconomic interdependence and uncertainty about Russia's state capacity.

- The dependency of the DNR/LNR residents on the rest of Ukraine came through loud and clear. Despite six years of warfighting and political hostility, the Donbas residents continued to interact extensively across the frontlines. In January 2020, there were 1,067,899 frontline crossings in the Donbas for work, pension withdrawal, medical care, family visits, business, and other [reasons](#). Over 300,000 pensioners in the non-government controlled areas (NGCA) ended up being [cut off](#) from payments. These are significant numbers relative to the DNR/LNR population size estimated at about [3.5 million](#). As Ukraine's government and the DNR/LNR restricted entry to territories under their control—suspending the late 2019 agreements to simplify [border crossings](#)—residents' in the NGCA complained about the missed connectedness.
- On March 16, 2020, following the lockdowns, Donbas SOS, an NGO assisting civilians on both sides of the conflict, saw the number of hotline calls from the DNR/LNR spike up from their monthly average of 120 to 256. Callers pleaded for help with visits for family events, chemotherapy treatments, doctor appointments, cemetery visits, and pension payments. Some callers worried they might be unable to have COVID-19 tests if they developed symptoms and noted the [shortage](#) of medical facilities in the DNR/LNR areas.
- By late April 2020, as the number of COVID-19 cases in the DNR/LNR increased, local medical workers reported being in a state of panic over the [lack](#) of facilities and resources—a considerable number of which had been destroyed or damaged from 2014 through 2017.² In NGCA's Donetsk and Makeyevka, five hospitals were put under total or partial [quarantine](#) for two weeks due to COVID-19 outbreaks among medical personnel.
- In telephone interviews throughout the NGCA conducted by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS), 56 percent of 1,200 local respondents preferred to [remain](#) within Ukraine. That majority endured from 2016 to 2019 despite relentless anti-Ukraine campaigning in the NGCA. Moreover, close to half of those respondents did not insist on Kyiv granting special autonomous status to the DNR/LNR. One in three respondents in 2019 said they had crossed into the Ukraine government-controlled regions in the previous six months, while one in six respondents crossed over at least once a month.

² See: Erik Herron, Cynthia Buckley, Ralph Clem, "[Attacks on Healthcare Infrastructure in the Donbas: Implications for Ukrainian State Legitimacy](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 562, January 2019.

- Rather than advocating compromises with Kyiv to solve those problems, [DNR](#) and [LNR](#) leaders [virulently criticized](#) the entry restrictions, intimating that Ukraine was using the pandemic to sabotage the Minsk agreements. The DNR's head, Denis Pushilin, categorically [stated](#): "We never had and never will have any prerequisites to ask Ukraine for help."

From Pseudo-Separatism to Reverse Irredentism

- Whereas insisting that their entities have distinct and separate interests that need to be internationally [recognized](#), the statelet leaders' *de facto* moved closer to Russia. A pro-Russia Donbas online news portal [proclaimed](#): "They have coronavirus, we have Russia."
- In a statement on April 7, 2020, to mark six years since the DNR proclamation, its head, Denis Pushilin, pledged "not to swerve from the road toward integration with Russia," noting: "Neither war nor other hardships can stop us from reaching the [main objective](#)." DNR authorities, for the first time, declared Russia's state holiday, the Day of Russia (June 12), as an official [holiday](#) on its territory.
- The DNR/LNR stepped up the promotion of Russian citizenship among DNR/LNR residents. On April 10, 2020, the DNR removed existing waitlist quotas, thus allowing an unlimited number of applications to be filed online anytime for DNR and [Russian citizenship](#) (DNR citizenship is a prerequisite for obtaining Russian passports). In the LNR, quarantine was enacted and borders closed, but an exception was made for DNR and LNR residents traveling to the neighboring Rostov province for Russian passports. Citing eyewitnesses, media reported several charter buses arriving weekly in late March-early April 2020 for that reason from the DNR/LNR into the nearby town of [Krasnoye Sulino](#).
- The DNR amended its constitution on March 6, 2020, declaring Russian the sole official language on its territory, with the stated goal of strengthening [ties](#) with Russia. The DNR also mandated that secondary schools on its territory transition to the Russian state [curriculum](#) starting September 1 and that mandated teachers and college instructors be [retrained](#) to Russian standards.
- Both the DNR and LNR decreed in April 2020 that their capital cities would revert to Soviet-era names in messages about the Soviet victory in World War II and any related events: [Stalino](#) and [Voroshilovgrad](#). The names commemorate the Soviet dictator and his one-time defense minister, respectively. Both statelets rescheduled [military parades](#) to mark the World War II victory to the same day as Russia, June 24.

These moves are particularly telling of DNR/LNR intentions, as they were made when serious doubts arose about Russia's capacity and resolved to prop up its client statelets in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Brent crude oil prices—a potent indicator of Russia's economic position—dropped this year from \$70/barrel in early January 2020 to \$15/barrel in [late March](#) and \$9/barrel in [late April](#)—historic lows not seen since [late 1998](#). Those drops also signaled that prospective shifts toward telecommuting in the post-pandemic world would further curtail demand for fossil fuels, and with it, Russia's state capacity.
- Against the backdrop of Russia's large medical equipment airlifts to the United States and Italy in late March 2020, the non-dispatch of Russia's regular convoy of dozens of military trucks to help the DNR/LNR cope with COVID-19 was poignantly conspicuous; 95 such convoys brought in and took out of the DNR/LNR cargoes with unverified content including some humanitarian aid from mid-2014 through [November 2019](#). These developments imply that the political fortunes of DNR/LNR leaders could quickly become a small change in Russia's larger geopolitical strategies. And yet, the DNR/LNR leaders profusely [praised Moscow](#) for smaller-scale [assistance](#).

Notably, the DNR synced its public health systems' [responses to COVID](#) with Russia rather than with Ukraine, even though Russia experienced higher infection and mortality rates.

The Donbas War: Keeping Up Moscow's Leverage

The intensity of military confrontation in a war that has claimed close to 14,000 lives decreased below the 2019 average during the first month after COVID lockdowns on both sides, but increased again later, originating predominantly in the DNR/LNR.

- According to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) [reports](#), the number of ceasefire violations in the Donbas, including the use of firepower, decreased markedly from mid-March to mid-April 2020 (see **Figure 1**). After a spike around March 30-April 1, the number of explosions—exchanges of fire including artillery bombardments and regularly resulting in casualties—became less intense, with the weekly average dropping from 250 to about 125 by April 20, 2020 (see **Figure 2**). The number of weapons prohibited by Minsk accords near the line of control—most notably by the DNR/LNR forces—also declined (see **Figure 2**).
- Whereas SMM reports studiously avoid naming which side initiates the use of force on a given day, an analysis of locations it provides where the majority of explosions take place indicates that most bombardments and shootings come from the DNR/LNR side (**Figure 1**). Areas around the government-controlled Zolote and Stanytsa Luhanska settlements in Luhansk province were a major

target of the use of firepower on 13 out of 23 days from late March through late April. Both were areas from which the Ukrainian armed forces and Russian-backed DNR/LNR forces pulled back one kilometer in late 2019. The location of explosions in the government-controlled areas, as [identified](#) by SMM, indicates they originated from the DNR/LNR or came against DNR/LNR forces pushing into government-controlled territory.

- Ceasefire violations and explosions have picked up again since late April, coming close to the 2019 levels, and in late May, the DNR staged military drills close to CGA areas. Indicative of their predominant origin, the overall level of hostilities was most closely tracked by the number of times DNR/LNR forces restricted the OSCE SMM freedom of movement (see **Figure 1**).

The DNR/LNR leaders failed to follow through on Kyiv's proposal—conveyed to the Russian government through OSCE by former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma on March 26, 2020—to observe a full ceasefire during the pandemic. And though the DNR foreign minister [welcomed](#) the U.N. Secretary General's blanket proposal to stop fighting globally, she made no mention of the Kuchma proposal, which was issued in response to the UNSG's proposal—a striking omission.

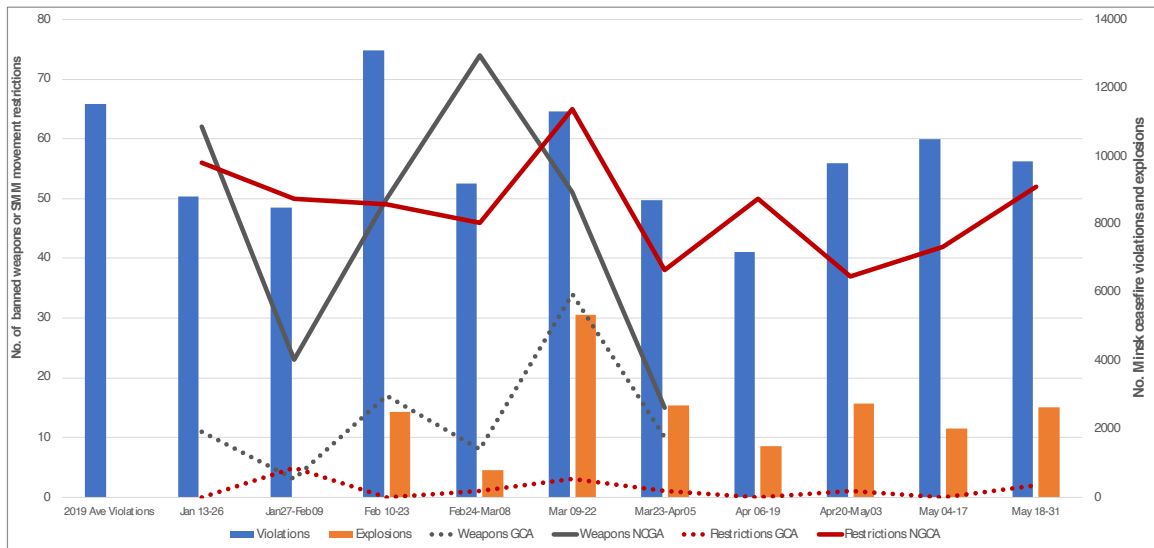
Meanwhile, DNR leaders continued to express confidence that Kyiv would eventually yield to DNR/LNR political demands. The only way for them to make such claims is to have confidence in their military superiority—something that would be unthinkable without Moscow's support and without them counting on it and courting it. The head of DNR's legislature, Volodymyr Bidiyovka, [articulated](#) this position on the DNR government website: "Ukraine simply has no choice. It will have to negotiate with Donbas and under the terms established by Donbas. Otherwise, Ukraine will simply cease to exist. The current social, humanitarian, economic and other Ukrainian crises only bring this disaster closer."

Conclusion

These developments have major implications. They call into question the viability of Ukraine president Zelensky's efforts to resolve the Donbas war through negotiations. Not only do the DNR/LNR positions remain unchanged, but their response to the pandemic also seems to harden their resolve and deepen their dependency on Moscow. Whether Moscow can and will increase its backing is an open question, but the DNR/LNR responses so far indicate that the COVID-19 impacts will be not only—and perhaps not even so much—a function of the pandemic's seriousness, but also a function of resolve to discount the pandemic-induced loss of life on the part of the leadership in the Russia-client statelets. And if the resolve to become part of Russia continues to harden, then the conflict-resolution goals Zelensky has relentlessly pursued since becoming president—notably troop pullouts from contested hotspots—would be unlikely to lead to the reintegration of the Donbas within Ukraine, but threaten to result in a renewed [militarized push](#) into the recent pullout areas, as happened in mid-February. The DNR/

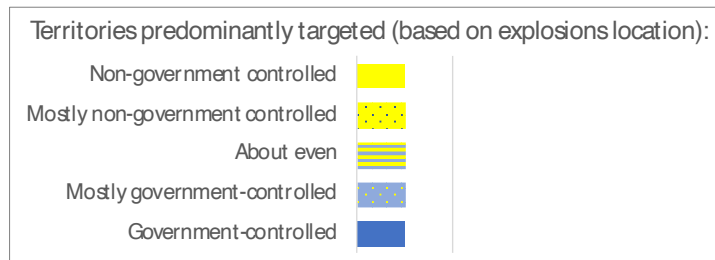
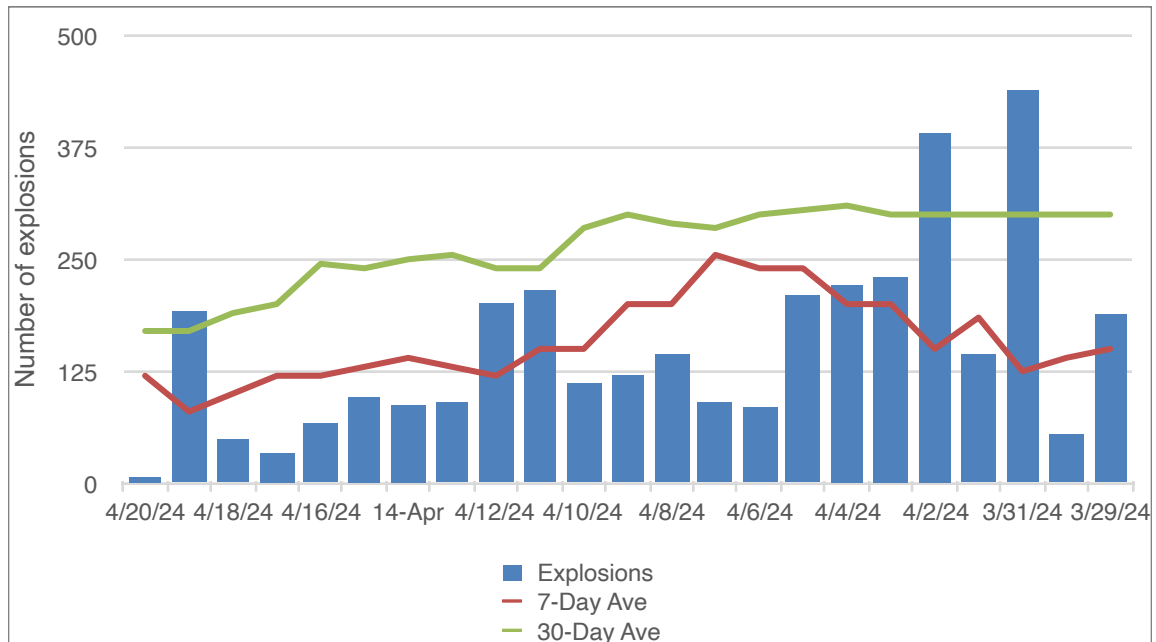
LNR leaders also directly state that negotiating with them will not lead to compromises, only to settle on their (Moscow's) terms. Finally, language matters. Journalists, academics, and officials writing about Ukraine would do well to forego the term "separatist entities" with respect to the DNR/LNR and instead refer to them as "statelets" seeking incorporation into Russia.

Figure 1. The Intensity of Military Confrontation in the Russia-Ukraine Donbas War (January-March 2020)



Source: OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine Status [Reports](#). Note: Weapons refer to those prohibited by Minsk Accords to be stationed near the line of control. OSCE SMM stopped reporting the number of those after April 5, 2020. The number of explosions was not included in reports before February 10, 2020.

Figure 2. While Warfighting in the Donbas Declined in the First Month after COVID Lockdowns, Most Attacks Targeted Ukrainian Government Forces



Source: OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine Daily Reports (based on the assessments of OSCE monitors about the location and direction of attacks resulting in explosions).

“From Russia With Love”

THE KREMLIN’S COVID-19 CHARM OFFENSIVE

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 687

January 2021

Alexandra Yatsyk¹

University of Tartu

The pandemic presented Russia’s long-serving, authoritarian government with a rare and ongoing opportunity to advance its interests vis-à-vis the West. Chaotic responses nearby in the EU and beyond to the extraordinary epidemiological emergency created an opening that the Kremlin endeavored to exploit through assistance and a quickly developed vaccine: Sputnik-V. In a throwback to Soviet-era global competitiveness, the Russian media have been portraying Moscow’s anti-coronavirus actions as magnanimous while pointing to the lack of solidarity in the West—all while it is still under multiple rounds of sanctions. The likely calculus is to elevate Russia’s status on the world stage while fostering divisions among adversaries where possible. However, delays and several controversies have revealed the haphazard and improvised character of President Vladimir Putin’s anti-COVID-19 charm offensive. On a positive note, Sputnik-V is now being administered and may prove to be sound, but misinformation and mismanagement continue to surround it.

Working the Contrasts

During the initial phase of the outbreak in April-May 2020, the Russian government [delivered](#) COVID-19-related aid to 46 countries around the world. In Europe, Russia’s aid recipients were Italy, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In March, several planeloads of medical equipment were sent “from Russia with love” to the badly virus-battered Italy. These actions were loudly trumpeted in the Russian state-controlled media as an expression of Russia’s magnanimity and generosity. However, later, the plan spectacularly backfired when the Italian media reported that Russia’s 104-man-strong team of medics [included](#) operatives from Russia’s military intelligence service (GRU) and that at least 80 percent of the supplies were [useless](#). Even more

¹ [Alexandra Yatsyk](#) is a Coordinator of the Baltic-Black Sea Region Project at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu, Estonia.

embarrassing was the report in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* on April 12 that the Italians were offered 200 Euros for recording videos [thanking](#) the Russian authorities for their assistance.

A similar fiasco awaited Russia's dispatch of medical equipment to the United States when it turned out that the Aventa-M ventilators were blamed for at least two fires at Russian hospitals in Moscow and St. Petersburg that left six COVID-19 patients dead, [leading](#) the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to ban their use. Subsequently, Russian medical staff, who had worked with the equipment, [admitted](#) to *The Moscow Times* that they were faulty. Nevertheless, in a gesture of goodwill, Washington reciprocated by [sending](#) \$5.6 million worth of medical equipment, including 200 ventilators, to Russia.

The Kremlin was also not successful in its attempts to promote a Russian version of a UN General Assembly (UNGA) declaration on COVID-19, which underneath was [aimed](#) at lifting post-Crimea sanctions. Also, Russian efforts fell short when Moscow failed to promptly deliver medical aid to Serbia, a close Russian friend, as was done by China when it sent aircraft to Belgrade and the EU, which promised funds.

Sputnik-V and Russia's Simple-Minded Vaccine Race

The Russian government's fast-track approach to vaccine development clearly reflects its desire to be at the forefront of the global fight against COVID-19, which will, in the Kremlin's calculus, place Russia as a great power. In his pre-recorded address to the UN General Assembly in September 2020, Putin boasted that Russia was the first country to register an anti-COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik-V, and was [offering](#) to share it with the world. Russia's Ministry of Health [released](#) the first batch of vaccines for domestic distribution on September 8, with nationwide vaccination to commence in October.

Meanwhile, the scientific data undergirding the Russian vaccine were [provided](#) to the Western scientific community in early September amid questions about its integrity – as [reflected](#) in an open letter to the principal inventor of the Russian vaccine from 19 scientists from Italy, France, Germany, the United States, and Japan. Notwithstanding doubts about the efficacy of the Russian vaccine in the Western scientific community, the Russian government was very busy promoting it. This was [reflected](#) in preliminary agreements to supply 1.2 billion doses of Sputnik-V by ten countries in Asia, South America, and the Middle East, including Brazil, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, and India. Russian diplomats have been actively [promoting](#) Sputnik-V in Egypt. As of December 31, more than 50 countries placed orders for a total of 1.2 billion doses of Sputnik-V, according to the state-owned Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which [oversees](#) its production and distribution.

The beginning of 2021 brought both opportunities and setbacks for Russia in its pharmaceutical [competition](#) with the West. Countries had to make procurement decisions. In early January, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a close ally of Putin,

chose to purchase China's vaccine instead of Russia's, [saying](#) that Sputnik-V had insufficient production and capacity. In November, *The Bell* [reported](#) that none of the four major enterprises – R-Pharm, BinnoPharm, Generium, and Biokad – tasked with the production of Sputnik-V were ready for its mass production.

Amid burgeoning online memes,² Algeria and Bolivia joined the Sputnik-V queue, as well as India (100 million doses), Brazil (50 million), Uzbekistan (35 million), Mexico (32 million), and Nepal (25 million). Although the vaccine's efficacy has not been conclusively proven, it has a price-point advantage; it costs roughly \$10 per dose, which is less than its main competitors, Pfizer (\$20) and Moderna (\$33).

On December 29, 2020, Argentina became the third country after Russia and Belarus to [authorize](#) vaccinations using Sputnik-V. Only one percent of those vaccinated experienced side effects, [according](#) to the Argentinean media. On January 1, India's state regulator [approved](#) two vaccines, AstraZeneca and COVAXIN, ahead of Sputnik-V. Given the sheer size of India's population, the vaccination campaign there will probably be the largest in the world, and the authorities put forth an ambitious objective of vaccinating 300 million people in 6-8 months. Serbia [commenced](#) mass vaccination with Sputnik-V on January 5, but it runs in parallel with the one that started earlier using the Pfizer vaccine.

Doubts at Home and Abroad

Meanwhile, the epidemiological situation within Russia sharply deteriorated throughout 2020, leading the government to finally [admit](#) that COVID-19 was responsible for 81 percent of the increase in the annual overall mortality rate in Russia. This implied that more than 186,000 people died from COVID-19 in Russia in 2020, making it the third worst hit by the pandemic after the United States and Brazil. What makes the situation worse is that there is a very high degree of public skepticism toward the vaccine. According to a global survey of public attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccination [conducted](#) by Ipsos in mid-December 2020, only 43 percent of respondents in Russia expressed the willingness to get vaccinated, which was the second-lowest after France (40 percent) and far behind the United States (69 percent), Canada (71 percent), UK (77 percent), and China (80 percent).

As of January 22, 2021, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) had not issued the certification necessary to launch the production and/or distribution of the Russian vaccine in the EU. In early winter, on December 9, EMA's Executive Director Emer Cooke [stated](#) that the agency did not receive a request for authorization from either Russia or China. But on January 5, President Vladimir Putin [discussed](#) the possibility of the joint production of Sputnik-V with Germany with Chancellor Angela Merkel. However, a day later, the German government's press spokesperson Ulrike Demmer [clarified](#) that the production of Sputnik-V in Germany would only be possible with

² See, for example, artist Andrzej Rysuje's image of Sputnik-V soaring over other vaccines [on Facebook](#).

EMA's approval. The lack of EMA authorization did not seem to deter Moscow from actively seeking to market Sputnik-V in Europe. Russia's RDIF [applied](#) to EMA for registration of Sputnik-V in the EU on January 20, but apparently, it is still "not undergoing a rolling review" [by](#) EMA. Hungary, which made headlines by declining the Russian vaccine at first, became the first EU country to agree to [buy](#) the Russian vaccine.

Questions have been raised not only about the Russian government's ability to organize a mass vaccination program domestically but also about its commitments delivering Sputnik-V to other countries in accordance with contractual obligations. As of January 5, about a month after mass vaccinations in Russia commenced, only about one million were vaccinated, [according](#) to Alexander Gintsburg, director of the Gamaleya research center, a developer of the Russian vaccine. About one week later, the press [reported](#) that one-and-a-half million Russians had received the Sputnik-V vaccine, but some experts [suggest](#) that the vaccination numbers are significantly lower.

Conclusion

The Russian leadership felt that the global rollout of Sputnik-V would be a competitive, triumphant creation. In the aftermath of Alexei Navalny's poisoning, the Russian government found itself in such a dire predicament in terms of reputational damage that its vaccine was seen as a viable, if risky, strategy to change the narrative, "beat the West," and improve its position on the world stage. In this sense, Moscow had little to lose because even if Sputnik-V turned out to be ineffective in comparison with Western vaccines, the consequences would be limited to canceling contracts and arbitration at most. If the Russian vaccine proved to be effective, Putin's regime would share the news widely while highlighting transatlantic deficiencies and divisions. In the end, as multiple vaccines including Russia's reach communities around the world, the results of Putin's COVID-19 charm offensive will be transient.

Part III.

The Useful Excuse: COVID-19 and Securitization Trends

Video Surveillance and COVID-19 in Eurasia

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 649
May 2020

Erica Marat¹
National Defense University

To enforce quarantine measures, some Eurasian cities are relying on smart surveillance technologies initially installed a few years ago to capture criminal and disorderly behavior. Moscow, Nur-Sultan, and Kyiv have been leaders in retooling existing electronic surveillance infrastructure, including facial recognition cameras, to monitor violations of government restrictions on movement amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recent measures taken by these cities have shown that in the name of the public good, cutting edge technologies can be quickly adapted to new functions by municipal and national authorities. Without a broader debate about implications for privacy and civil liberties, such rapid shifts are likely to benefit political incumbents and expand their control over urban populations. The issue of digital surveillance as a way of controlling the spread of COVID-19 is discussed worldwide, including in the United States and Europe, but in Eurasia, surveillance is augmented top-down by national and municipal authorities without public oversight.

Electronic Surveillance Regimes in Eurasia

Smart city technologies have become ubiquitous across cities in Eurasia over the last few years. Moscow's mayor has pledged to make the Russian capital, already one of the most interconnected cities in the world, [on par](#) with New York and London. Kyiv's mayor plans to expand the use of facial recognition cameras beyond the city's central zones. The president of Kyrgyzstan has [declared](#) that "digital technology comes to daily life" and last year smart cameras were installed in Bishkek. Cities with varying economic capabilities introduced elements of smart technologies that recognize faces, motions, emotions, and license plates.

"Smart" and "safe" are often used interchangeably in the Eurasian context meaning

¹ [Erica Marat](#) is Associate Professor in the Department of Regional and Analytical Studies at the National Defense University. *Please note:* The opinions, conclusions and recommendations expressed or implied within the report are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the National Defense University, the Defense Department, or the U.S. Federal Government.

innovative technologies installed to protect the general public from disorderly behavior. But beyond surveillance, other common aspects of the “smartization” of urban spaces are slower to spread, such as improvements accessing public transportation and using public utilities. Municipal authorities have worked with interior ministries to focus on areas where violations may take place, and surveillance cameras have become the leading feature of such innovations.

With the spread of the COVID-19 virus, some cities are retooling smart technologies to help enforce quarantine measures. Several of the more highly surveilled cities in Eurasia – Moscow, Kyiv, and Nur-Sultan – have relied on smart technologies to identify infected individuals and violators of social distancing measures. Evidence collected by smart cameras is reported to police who can then use it to accuse, fine, or detain individuals. Russia and Kazakhstan have been particularly aggressive in deploying smart cameras to monitor both urban and rural areas. Yet not all cities with newly introduced smart technologies have been able to resort to similar levels of “surveillance of quarantines.”

Yerevan, Bishkek, and Chisinau have all previously announced transitions to smart city technologies and installed smart cameras in the most populated areas, but these cities seem to continue to rely on traditional law enforcement mechanisms by dispatching police officers to roam the streets. Why did some cities in Eurasia quickly retool their technologies to fight the pandemic, while others avoided, at least publicly, relying on electronic surveillance?

From my research on the spread of surveillance technologies in urban areas in Eurasia, I see a similarly negative impact of rapid technological innovations on law enforcement practices within a city.² Independent of whether a city has a more democratic political environment (e.g., Kyiv or Bishkek) or exists within an authoritarian context (e.g., Moscow or Almaty, which is larger than Nur-Sultan), technologies are installed without public debate on privacy and methods of controlling data collected from the streets. Instead, depending on each city’s availability of funds and access to skilled labor, three different electronic surveillance regimes emerge.

First, cities with modest budgets, like Dushanbe, Yerevan, and Bishkek, embark on opaque deals with Chinese and Russian tech firms such as [Huawei](#) or [Vega](#). These companies may perform larger geopolitical functions for their governments by harvesting data across the globe, and therefore they offer flexible pricing for their services when entering foreign markets. Upon installing surveillance cameras, these cities usually depend on fines paid by traffic violators to service loans to foreign firms. This model results in a lopsided relationship between the public and their municipal authorities. The more crimes and violations reported, the faster external debts are paid off. As a result, there is less incentive for the authorities to improve social and economic conditions to reduce deviant behavior. These cities are also likely to share data collected from their streets with foreign providers. For instance, Vega [collects data](#) into its Prisma

² Article forthcoming in *Europe-Asia Studies*, September 2020.

Cloud that is operated from Russia. Chinese contractors [do not specify](#) how collected data will be stored and who will have access to it. Due to their deep dependence on external suppliers of technologies, it is probably more difficult for poorer cities to quickly redirect their use of technologies for other public measures.

Second, wealthier cities such as Moscow, Kyiv, and Almaty have developed hybrid models. While still depending on foreign companies for supply of technologies, they simultaneously enhance domestically grown technological innovations that generate localized models for law enforcement. These cities have been early adopters of different types of electronic surveillance mechanisms on the streets. They are driven both by the idea of enhancing domestic surveillance of disorder and by mimicking international examples for innovations. At a public meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin [boasted](#) that his city is covered by 200,000 cameras and that soon only China would have larger metropolis coverage areas. Cameras now [supply evidence](#) in 70 percent of criminal investigations in Moscow.

Almaty has the largest number of smart cameras in Kazakhstan, [reaching](#) over 119,000, thanks to supplies from Chinese, Russian, and Western firms. For surveillance purposes during the pandemic, however, Kazakhstan's authorities rely on Sergek, a domestic supplier of smart technologies capable of storing and processing big data. Nur-Sultan and Almaty have installed 14,000 and 2,000 Sergek cameras, respectively. Even though Almaty has been the national leader in installing surveillance technologies, Sergek is more widespread in Nur-Sultan. Therefore, the pandemic will be surveilled through cameras more intensely in the capital.

In Kyiv, the authorities collaborate almost exclusively with the Chinese company HikVision. By 2019, the city's number of surveillance cameras exceeded 8,000, a significantly smaller number than Almaty's. The Ukrainian authorities stress the valuable role that smart cameras play helping to solve crimes in areas where police are in short supply. Cameras—some visible, some concealed—are used in [public spaces](#), including roads, bridges, schools, bus stops, tourist attractions, and downtown areas. The cameras can help law enforcement agencies better monitor crowds during large events and can [determine](#) “the age, the route of travel, and even the emotional state” of an individual in a crowd. In early April, officials announced that they were planning to purchase 400 HikVision heat-sensitive cameras capable of identifying individuals with fevers.

Finally, the third category includes cities like Tallinn, Estonia, that generate safe and smart city models through entirely domestic innovation capabilities, often with emphases on environmental issues and public connectivity. In contrast to Moscow and Nur-Sultan, the Estonian Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications [crowdsourced ideas](#) to “hack” the virus. Within days, the winners of the public-private initiative [included projects](#) to connect people most at risk and create platforms for workforce sharing. In Kyrgyzstan, entrepreneurs launched #HackCoronaForKG to distribute food and solicit help during the pandemic. Similar grassroots actions relying

on technologies have emerged in both Russia and Kazakhstan but they exist in parallel to government response efforts. Most cities across Eurasia likely have domestic cadres capable of developing algorithms that use their current systems' street data.

Retooling Surveillance During COVID-19

In early March, Kazakhstan was the first state in the former Soviet space to [announce](#) the use of surveillance to fight the spread of COVID-19—even before introducing strict quarantine measures. Soon after, Moscow's mayor announced that police could [punish](#) all motorists or individuals exiting their apartment buildings and violating quarantine rules based on electronic surveillance evidence. The head of the Department of Information Technology of Moscow, Sergey Lysenko, said that infected persons quarantined at home are given phones with [preinstalled applications](#) that monitor their movements. The Moscow authorities explained that their smart cameras could identify individuals even if they are wearing facial masks.

Since the announcement of extraordinary measures to help stop the COVID-19 pandemic, media outlets have been reporting infringements of quarantine measures captured by these technologies. A man in Moscow who recently returned from Italy and was placed under quarantine was [detected](#) throwing trash away outside his apartment building. The police came to his home with photographic evidence depicting him exiting his building; they had matched the photograph with his passport information. To date, 90 people have been [accused](#) of violating quarantine measures in Moscow. In just two days in March, 307 people were charged with administrative violations. For perspective, in the last week of March, 2,000 people in Nur-Sultan had “administrative measures” taken against them for [violating](#) the state of emergency. All motorists are monitored, and citizens moving around in private vehicles are required to obtain permits.

However, such detailed reporting, which relies on individual cases and statistical records, constructs both a false impression of government effectiveness in preempting the spread of the virus as well as justification for why total control by smart technologies is necessary for people's daily lives. Technologies help police and municipal authorities move toward result-oriented law enforcement by measuring success in terms of the number of interdictions, completed criminal investigations, arrests, and fines imposed thanks to documented violations. This utilitarian function of these technologies serves the larger ideal of a society in which even minor crimes are [meticulously documented](#), a habit dating back to the Soviet tradition of criminological research. Like Soviet-era practices of [enforcing](#) autocratic regimes, government policies will eventually extend regime control over diverse groups. The aspiration for modernity and the urge to repress may coexist in a country's promise to improve the quality of life within a city.

Yet, photographic evidence of disorderly or criminal behaviors conveys a narrow representation of the vast range of experiences lived within a city. Not discussed in these drives for innovation are issues that force individuals to engage in disorderly or criminal behavior, including unequal access to public goods and infrastructure. Visual evidence

of disorderly behavior reduces chances for a more comprehensive police investigation and is unlikely to be contested in courts. Surveillance cameras [change](#) the metrics around how crimes are counted, pre-empted, and punished, with a greater emphasis on crime statistics derived from surveilled areas. Cities can [pick and choose](#) what to surveil from a menu of different behaviors, depending on their policy priorities.

Privacy and Digital Prisons

Discussions on privacy violations related to governments' reliance on smart technologies have yet to catch up with reality in Eurasian cities. The first substantive reaction to surveillance came recently from Russian opposition activist Alexey Navalny, who [labeled](#) the Moscow authorities' reliance on advanced technologies as a "digital concentration camp" and reminded them of the lack of basic protective equipment among medical personnel. In his [terms](#), the Moscow government communicates in the style of, "We will watch you. If you won't do something right, we will find out. You may think that the police aren't catching you, but we see you through the video camera."

Activists in Moscow are especially alarmed about easy access to the content collected by smart cameras, offered for a fee by house committees (*domkom*) or online hackers. Interestingly, however, according to anti-corruption activist Georgy Albuov's investigation, Sobyanin's own apartment building, as well as other top-ranking officials' buildings along the city's so-called fancy Golden Mile (*Zolotaya milya*), are [not covered](#) by smart cameras. The elites are allowed to escape the city's gaze and maintain their privacy.

In Kazakhstan, critiques of unchecked surveillance began to [emerge](#) among lawyers and political activists earlier this year. But amid the pandemic, opposition activists have shifted most of their attention towards ways to support economically deprived segments of the population, victims of domestic violence, and the needs of healthcare workers.

Conclusion

Moscow, Kyiv, and Nur-Sultan are right in taking harsh measures to prevent the spread of the novel virus. But even amid the pandemic, discussions of civil liberties must not be overshadowed by the urge to protect public health. In the long term, smart cameras can be seamlessly retooled for other political or social purposes, all in the name of the public good. Technologies provide a sense of control by the authorities, but in reality, they may be enforcing order only selectively in areas with the highest availability of smart cameras. Instead of relying on surveillance technologies to successfully maintain social distancing, municipal authorities can solicit ideas from the public on the best ways to serve communities facing the greatest risk of exposure to the virus or assisting the needs of healthcare workers and other essential workers.

Russia and Digital Surveillance in the Wake of COVID-19

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Paul Goode¹

University of Bath

Russia's response to the current pandemic highlights its aspirations to become a world leader in facial recognition and artificial intelligence (AI). The adoption of self-isolation and digital pass regimes provides opportunities to showcase the country's growing network of "safe city" programs with video surveillance for crowd and traffic control, which in some cities includes facial and vehicle recognition capabilities. However, the practical effect has been to highlight its limitations while facilitating the rapid expansion of data collection on Russian citizens.

Building Population Databases

The Russian government views AI as a crucial area of development and international competition, particularly with China and the United States. President Vladimir Putin famously [stated](#) in 2017 that, "whoever gains a monopoly in [artificial intelligence] will rule the world." In recent years, Russia has promoted the growth of intelligent public administration and law enforcement systems, in particular through the expansion of "safe city" and "smart city" programs. AI development also represents a lucrative future source of patronage, which is increasingly valuable for preserving political control when the economy is stagnating. The market volume of AI and machine learning in Russia was estimated at \$10.8 million in 2017 and predicted to [skyrocket](#) to \$432 million by 2020. Perhaps indicative of the sector's patronage potential, Putin's daughter Katerina Tikhonova was [appointed](#) to lead a new AI institute at Moscow State University with starting investment totaling \$59 million.

Despite its aspirations and possession of significant technological expertise, Russia lags behind the world leaders in AI development, lacking the vast troves of user data possessed by China and the market conditions found in the West. The rapid expansion of China's capabilities in AI owes much to the datasphere provided by WeChat (the dominant Chinese social media platform), government access to personal data traffic,

¹ [Paul Goode](#) is Senior Lecturer in Russian Politics at the University of Bath.

and a culture that is less sensitive to government surveillance.² Russia's approach to digital surveillance is characterized primarily by way of filtering internet activity—meaning that it is not yet able to replicate China's advantageous possession of population data despite its extensive system of domestic surveillance known as SORM ("System for Operative Investigative Activities").³

Russia's options for AI development are further [limited](#) by international sanctions and generally a lack of trust from private investors. Russia's business culture remains extremely protective of its advantages and companies are reluctant to advertise their successes in using AI for fear of competition. Advances in the private sector's development of AI are further slowed by the combination of insufficient computing power and low levels of automation. The state and state corporations have thus taken the lead in setting the agenda for AI development in Russia. These efforts began largely in 2015 with the [creation](#) of a consortium of more than 30 companies and academic organizations under the auspices of a branch of RosTec known as the United Equipment Building Corporation. The [creation](#) of a new Center for Artificial Intelligence to be hosted by the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technologies was announced in 2017 and started working in 2018 with a consortium of partners that includes state corporations like Sberbank, RosTelekom, Gazprom, the state railway company RZhD, and RosSeti. Other state corporations like Sberbank, RosAtom, and RosTelekom are working along with the Ministry of Construction, Housing, and Utilities and the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and the mass media in developing "smart cities" as part of the government's "digital economy" national project.

Russia's national AI strategy, [adopted](#) in October 2019, calls for an ambitious program for the development of AI through 2030, including the construction of a massive population database and the production of a proprietary hardware platform. The execution of the national AI strategy will be the responsibility of the Ministry of Economics, while state corporations like RosTec and Sberbank will play a leading role in implementation. RosTec includes NtechLab, which provides the facial recognition technology used by Moscow. Sberbank, led by former Minister of Economics German Gref, has developed into a major player in the domestic technology competition and is considered on par with Yandex in terms of expertise and personnel. It drafted Russia's national AI strategy together with the Ministry of Communications.

Digital Surveillance and COVID-19

In 2019, the Moscow mayor's office, together with Sberbank, [initiated](#) an "experimental legal regime" for developing AI with an emphasis on facial recognition, transport, and medicine, which took advantage of the more than 160,000 cameras that already watch

² See: Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019.

³ See: Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries*, PublicAffairs, 2015.

the city's 12 million inhabitants. In January 2020, NtechLab's facial recognition system identified more than 200 Muscovites who broke mandated self-isolation regimes after foreign travel. After this seemingly successful trial run, Sberbank and RosTec were quick to use the pandemic as an opportunity to expand their reach.

Sberbank's Gref declared in February 2020 that his company was prepared to [provide support](#) to the Russian government for fighting COVID-19, including "providing instruments like AI and facial recognition for cases in which people's faces are covered by masks." Similarly, RosTec's Sergei Chemezov [contacted](#) all regional leaders directly, offering to help them to install similar facial recognition systems to fight COVID-19. According to NtechLab's Aleksandr Kabakov, large scale deployment in a short time would not be possible, but "monitoring of public zones (streets, parks, key transport objects) could be deployed in one or two months." Regional media reported dozens of instances of regions moving to link citizens' digital passes during quarantine to "safe city" surveillance networks (accessible by regional administrations as well as law enforcement) to identify cars and pedestrians violating quarantine. In the Krasnodar region alone, the regional authorities claimed to have [identified](#) 504,000 vehicles breaking quarantine in just the first day of the system's operation.

Despite this fast start, implementation of facial recognition and social tracking became strained under the growing crisis. In March, the Moscow city administration made a "social monitoring" app available for download that required users' photos and telephone numbers to activate. However, programmers on a Telegram channel dedicated to discussing information technology [discovered](#) that the app actually used an Estonian facial recognition service and sent users' photos to a German cloud storage company. City authorities [denied](#) that the app used foreign servers, though it soon disappeared from Google's app store and it was later announced that the app would only be made available to those recovering from infection at home. Moscow finally abandoned plans for widespread facial recognition and switched to a lower-tech method of distributing smartphones with a pre-installed "social monitoring" app to infected patients. The city authorities next introduced a digital pass system, but [botched implementation](#) led to massive, hour-long queues at metro stations. Widespread [reliance](#) on Telegram, which is banned in Russia, for vital pandemic information led Duma deputies to [argue](#) for lifting the blockade because it "hurts the government's prestige more than the app."

The surge in nationwide network traffic during the crisis has also put pressure on internet and telecommunications providers that are struggling to meet the storage requirements mandated by the so-called [Yarovaya law](#) requiring all internet providers, social media, and messaging services to store user data for three years and to grant authorities access to encrypted communications. As Russia's regions moved in April to meet Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's order that they [implement](#) phone-based geolocation digital pass systems, the Ministry of Digital Development proposed [amending](#) the law "On Communications" to require the linking of biometric data to sim cards, which ought to facilitate facial recognition in crowds by integrating information from government and mobile provider databases. The burden on providers for tracking

and storing user data will escalate yet again in July 2020 when all smartphones sold in Russia will be [required](#) to pre-install Russian-made, government-approved applications that include search, GPS, social networking, personal digital assistants, and public service and payment apps. Consequently, rather than significantly enhancing the availability of population data for linking facial recognition with other kinds of data, the [surge](#) in network usage during the pandemic has put pressure on the government to postpone the requirement to increase annually the storage of user traffic.

Finally, attempts to grapple with the pandemic have further exposed extreme regional variations, as regions with limited technological capacity for digital surveillance have adopted more coercive measures. In turn, these variations in capabilities and enforcement stimulate criticism of regional and local governments and feed opposition concerns. At one extreme, Nizhny Novgorod was one of the first regions to introduce a smartphone app that uses QR code scanning to manage residents' requests to go outside. However, "review bombing" of the region's tracking app led to its [removal](#) from the Google Play store. The regional government later claimed that it was deleted from the app store because it had been improperly categorized as "Finance" rather than "Medicine." Elsewhere, in Russia's northwest, Karelia's governor ordered the addresses of patients to be [published online](#), including street and house numbers. At the other extreme, Murmansk opted for a low-tech solution: those patients confirmed to be infected were required to [wear](#) tracking bracelets for remote monitoring, similar to those used for house arrest.

AI for Export?

While the leaders in Russia's AI sector may have hoped to turn the pandemic into an opportunity, it is more likely that the pandemic will force a reckoning with its limitations. Russia's existing strengths stem from its widespread filtering of internet traffic throughout the former Soviet space and its ability to use social media to create narrative confusion and to spread disinformation. While these have proven to be efficient means for [projecting power and disrupting politics](#) in other countries, the present crisis reveals their shortcomings—not just domestically, but also relative to China's capacities in terms of availability of hardware as well as the vast amounts of training data necessary to support digital surveillance systems.

In the near term, it is likely that Russia will continue to lose ground to China in Eurasia, especially in exporting hardware for digital surveillance. In recent years, China has been [particularly active](#) in Central Asia and the Caucasus, [extending soft loans](#) for digital surveillance technologies produced by Chinese companies like Huawei and HikVision. To the extent that the pandemic has created an urgent demand for smart technologies like facial recognition and heat-sensitive cameras, China is far better positioned to benefit. For example, Ukraine urgently [sought to purchase](#) more than \$2 million worth of thermal-sensitive cameras from HikVision in order to help with controlling the virus, though the contract was quickly cancelled for improprieties.

In the longer term, Russia has the potential to leverage its existing SORM-based surveillance networks in Eurasia to create a datasphere that rivals China's. In theory, its existing capabilities also provide it with the means to slow China's advance in the region – for instance, by creating incentives for cooperation through the Eurasian Economic Union, by using information warfare to inflame nationalist sentiment in target countries, or by instrumentally mobilizing international norms and ethics to slow the adoption of competitors' digital surveillance technology. Such tactics could help Russia to “run out the clock” while levelling up to the competition. The operative question, then, is whether Russia has time to spare, as one of the most important lessons of the pandemic for the Kremlin is that the clock is already ticking.

The Curious Case of State-Driven Regionalism in the Russian Far East

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Ekaterina Koldunova¹
Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO)

Since the turn of the century, the idea of the Russian Far Eastern regions' economic rise through cooperation with East Asian countries has been a persistent element of Russian political leadership rhetoric. Until very recently, however, this rhetoric did not fully correspond to Russia's domestic and foreign policy actions. Russia's economic cooperation with East Asian countries (except China) remained relatively low as compared to its economic relations with Europe. In the mid-2000s, domestic and international concerns provoked Moscow to initiate new, state-administered programs for the Far East. Domestic concerns included rising economic and demographic asymmetry between the European and Asian parts of Russia and between the Asian parts of Russia and nearby regions of China. International concerns involved the widening economic gap between Russia and China and deteriorating relations with the West because of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014.

Russian efforts to develop the Far East as well as Russia's "turn to Asia"—both proclaimed just before 2014—initially seemed to be discursive and most probably unexceptional. However, as argued here, a new wave of Russian reforms sped up economic development in that region. This has led to an emerging, specific form of regionalism, which may transform center-periphery relations in Russia's model of federalism. This dynamic, though, is very selective, largely economic in character, applied to only one particular area of the country, and still state- rather than region-driven. Within this dynamic, so far, intra-bureaucratic battles have consumed needless energy, and the region's chronically decreasing population numbers pose a threat to any development plans.

The Role of the Far East

More scholarship is needed on the issue of Far Eastern "underdevelopment," looking through the prism of both Russian federalism and the way Russia's Asian policy has

¹ [Ekaterina Koldunova](#) is Associate Professor in the Asian and African Studies Department and Senior Expert in the ASEAN Centre at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO).

been transforming the region. Knowledge gaps include the role of the Far East in Russia's system of center-periphery relations and the logic behind bureaucratic struggles over authority to develop the region—all against the background of deep transformations on the international scene.

Moscow's relations with its Asian regions and perceptions of "East" and "West" among the Russian political elite have become a [focus](#) of several philosophical and historical studies. There have also been numerous studies on center-periphery Russian relations with a specific look at the case of the Far East. But these have mainly [emphasized](#) the region's economic, demographic, or social problems that have resulted in specific [electoral behaviors](#) and in [distrust](#) in the government's efforts to upgrade development in that area. An important stream of analytical writing concerning the Far East has been about using appropriate state instruments to develop the region [internally](#) and its [role](#) in Russian foreign policy in Asia.

Traditionally, the Far East was a military, political and economic frontier of Russia in Asia. Its main maritime city, Vladivostok, became a free trading port with a short history of successful economic development at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, later on, in the Soviet period, it functioned to a greater extent as a military post and not as an economic connection with East Asia. The Far East was then understood as a macro-region devised for economic planning. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it retained its administrative borders uniting nine administrative units: Amur oblast, Jewish Autonomous oblast, Kamchatka krai, Magadan oblast, Primorsky krai, Sakha Republic, Sakhalin oblast, Khabarovsk krai, and Chukotka autonomous okrug.

Historically, the Far East was the home of several waves of separatism, which, however, did not encompass its whole territory. Thus, for example, the so-called Far Eastern Republic (in existence from 1920 to 1922) included Amur, Transbaikalia, Kamchatka, Primorye, and Sakhalin. In the 1990s, separatist tendencies spread mainly among the maritime coastal cities, which started to become more interconnected economically with neighboring China and Japan (mainly through the "shadow economy"). In short, however, there have been no historical reasons for political or economic regionalism that could have united today's Far East administrative entities. Since then, Russia's economic cooperation with East Asian countries (except China) has remained relatively low as compared to Russia's relations with Europe.

The Far East in Russia's Center-Periphery Relations

Center-periphery relations in Russian federalism have fluctuated from loose connectivity under President Boris Yeltsin to high centralization under President Vladimir Putin. However, existing typologies have not seriously considered the ways that the Far East may serve Russia's goal of economic development. At the same time, the political leadership has been advocating the idea of a proactive Russian stance toward East Asia. Until 2012-14, Russia's foreign policy actions toward East Asia, however, did not follow official rhetoric: the Russian political and economic elite has

remained largely Europe-oriented, and Russia has lacked comprehensive economic interdependence with East Asia. Throughout the second decade of this century, only China dominated the Russian external trade landscape, with its share of the overall Russian trade growing from [10.5 percent](#) in 2012 to [16.6 percent](#) in 2019. Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN member states significantly lagged behind.

Domestically, Russia has faced the increasingly pressing problem of developing its Siberian and Far Eastern regions. Since the early 1990s, the Far East has faced economic stagnation and demographic decline that exceeds average levels of depopulation in Russia sixfold. During the two decades from 1989 to 2010, it [lost 20 percent](#) of its population (the same numbers for Russia, in general, constituted 3.5 percent).

Internationally, one of the outcomes of the deterioration of relations with the West has been Russia's stronger relations with China, as exemplified by the Russo-Chinese gas deals struck in 2014 and the agreement to connect the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative with the Russia-led Eurasian integration project in 2015. The implications and durability of these stronger relations, however, have raised new questions. Some consider the dynamics of Sino-Russian relations as a sign of a new political (and probably military) [alliance in the making](#), while others [question](#) the symmetric nature of these relations taking into account China's stronger economic stance vis-à-vis Russia. The COVID-19 pandemic just added more complexity to these relations: while Russian and Chinese official discourse [stressed](#) the two countries' unity in the face of the common threat, the coordination in tackling this threat in the areas of Siberia and the Far East neighboring to China has [lagged behind](#).

Federal Efforts to Cope with the Far East

The 1996 "Federal Program of the Far Eastern and Transbaikalia Regions' Economic and Social Development" has remained mainly on paper. According to some non-official estimates, by the end of the first decade of this century, the program was only 25 percent implemented. With East Asia's economic rise, the asymmetry between Russia's most peripheral region and Russia's Asian neighbors has been rapidly expanding. Far Eastern socio-economic problems became particularly visible when the Chinese North-Western regions, which used to suffer from underdevelopment, started to witness positive economic dynamics.

In the 1990s, integration between the Far East and East Asia was seen in a distorted way. "Integration" meant shadow economy deals – often involving Russian timber and other products, as well as migration flows between China and Russia. Overall, the ongoing failure of the Russian government to resolve the socio-economic problems of its Asian regions has prompted some analysts to conclude that Russia cannot sustain the burden of its vast territory and needs to "[shrink](#)."

The decision to transform Vladivostok into a venue for the 2012 APEC Summit became a turning point in Russia's Far East policy, heralding a more attentive approach by the

Russian government to the region. At the same time, preparations for the summit revealed serious intra-elite divides concerning ways of developing the broader Siberian region. As the limited (at best) success of the federal program demonstrated, some Russian analysts [argued](#), the traditional bureaucratic way was not appropriate for upgrading economic and social conditions in the Far East.

Just two years before the APEC Summit, then-Prime Minister Putin charged then-Minister of Emergency Situations Sergei Shoigu to develop a draft project on the so-called “Eastern Corporation,” an autonomous state agency that could have focused specifically on the development of Eastern Siberia and the Far East. This agency, if created, would have had expanded authority, including in the financial sphere. As expected, the blueprint of the corporation met resistance from the financial bureaucracy. Minister of Finance Anton Siluanov instead proposed to create a federal agency, a structure of a much lower status and limited mandate.

In 2012, a consensus decision was to establish the new Federal Ministry for the Development of the Far East. In 2013, a new round of intra-bureaucracy battles resulted in a government decision to transfer some responsibilities from the Ministry of Regional Development, the Ministry of Economic Development, and the Ministry of Finance to this new entity.

In addition to the debate on what kind of agency should manage the development of the Far East, the government had also to choose between two diverging concepts of development. Ex-Minister of the Development of the Far East Viktor Ishayev personified the first one, while Vice-Premier Igor Shuvalov, who was responsible for the 2012 APEC Summit, personified the second. The former advocated a standard scheme of expanded state budget-financed investment in the social sphere and infrastructure, while the latter proposed to focus on certain clusters that could attract private investment and generate economic growth. In 2013, Putin replaced Ishayev with Alexander Galushka as the new minister for Far Eastern development and nominated Yuri Trutnev as vice-premier and the president’s representative in the Far East, thereby showing that the second concept had won the competition.

Trutnev and Galushka proposed three main goals. The first was to build an export-oriented economy, primarily in the natural resource sector. The second was to create extra-favorable conditions for business, comparable and even surpassing those existing in the neighboring East Asian economies. The final goal was to develop in the Far East more [sophisticated industries](#) such as the space industry (in the Amur region), aircraft building industry (Khabarovsk region), the shipbuilding and assembly industries (Vladivostok environs), and natural resource exploration. As the instrument of achieving these goals, Trutnev and Galushka created so-called “territories of advanced development,” special territorial clusters that have favorable conditions for business and investments.

The idea of a “Free Port Vladivostok” represents yet another example of an intra-bureaucratic struggle. To create better conditions for business connections, the Ministry of Far Eastern Development announced a visa-free regime for Vladivostok. This should have come into effect in 2015, by the first Eastern Economic Forum, a large-scale business-oriented international event launched to sustain the dynamics of reforms in the Far East. However, the enactment of the regime was postponed until 2017 due to a debate between various federal agencies concerning the scope and procedure of opening up Vladivostok and the neighboring area for international visitors. As a result, the number of countries eligible for a free electronic visa to enter Vladivostok was considerably reduced—out of all East Asian countries, the special regime started to function only for Brunei, China, Japan, North Korea,² and Singapore.

A combination of economic, social, and political indicators signaled that the centralized, government-driven regionalism did not fully correspond to the interests of the inhabitants. Despite official claims of a strong economic breakthrough, in fact, many declared projects did not properly function and were surrounded by bureaucratic difficulties. By 2019, only [7 out of 31](#) international projects in the “advanced development territories” started to operate. The infrastructure development [index](#) for the Far East remained lower than the Russian average (3.02 compared to 3.24) and almost three times lower than Moscow’s (8.2). Demographically, the population of the Far East has continued to decrease over this past decade. Only [1 percent](#) of the overall Russian population considered moving to the Far East for permanent residence *even* with the favorable conditions created by the federal programs.

The gubernatorial elections in Primorsky Krai in 2018 highlighted the broader problem when repeated elections were necessary to secure the victory of Oleg Kozhemiako, the central government-supported candidate. The local population’s discontent with federal management of regional affairs became visible in the prolonged mass protests against the arrest of now ex-governor of Khabarovsk krai Sergei Furgal. The protests started in August 2020 and had not fully stopped even by [December](#). In this case, the substance of the charge against Furgal became secondary vis-à-vis the local populations’ aspiration to make their own decision concerning the gubernatorial nominee via elections.

Conclusion

Over the last ten years, Russia’s political elite has demonstrated a will to solve the problem of Far Eastern underdevelopment. It created new institutions and drafted new financial and legal frameworks that differ from those of the rest of the country. However, the period mainly saw the institutional development of a new ministry, which was busy with intra-bureaucratic battles and conceptual discussions rather than practical measures. At the same time, the new stage of state policy toward the Far East represented a qualitatively different approach compared to previous periods. First, it

² Russia has had a visa-free regime with South Korea since 2014. On April 13, 2020 South Korea temporarily suspended the visa-free agreement with Russia due to the pandemic.

took into account the inevitability of opening up internationally. Second, it created new legal, financial, and economic instruments to this end. That said, although transformations have been economically oriented, they have been state-driven and bureaucratic rather than region-led.

Additional references available upon request.

Central Asian Responses to COVID-19

REGIME LEGITIMACY AND [DE]SECURITIZATION OF THE HEALTH CRISIS

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 692

March 2021

Mariya Y. Omelicheva¹
National Defense University

Lawrence P. Markowitz²
Rowan University

Despite a history of using discourses of danger to define other transnational challenges (e.g., Islamic radicalism), Central Asia's governments have not framed the coronavirus pandemic in security terms. Using examples of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, we explain this ambivalence by examining legitimization practices that have constrained and shaped the Central Asian regimes' narratives and responses to COVID-19. Dual claims to presidential authority in Kazakhstan, a leadership vacuum and elite division in Kyrgyzstan, and a turn toward technocratic governance in Uzbekistan have led to an inconsistent and limited securitization of the pandemic.

In assessing Central Asian responses, we emphasize the importance of following official discourses about COVID-19. Discourse is essential to producing shared perceptions of the disease, establishing boundaries of policy responses that are (or are not) permitted, and eliciting desired public behavior. Securitizing discourses in relation to COVID-19 offer an additional lens for probing the success and failure of state policies aimed at confronting the pandemic as well as people's decisions to follow or defy them.

Securitization Syndromes One Year Later

Just over a year since the first human cases of COVID-19 were identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, 219 countries and territories around the world have reported a total of over 100 million [confirmed cases](#) of the coronavirus, with a death toll surpassing 2 million deaths globally. The rapid spread of COVID-19 has shifted governments' thinking about health and security. Many countries have witnessed a move toward securitization of the health crisis by framing the novel coronavirus as an existential

¹ [Mariya Omelicheva](#) is Professor of National Security Strategy at the National War College, National Defense University. The views expressed in this memo are those of the author and do not represent an official position of the U.S. Government, Department of Defense, or NDU.

² [Lawrence Markowitz](#) is Professor of Political Science and Chair at Rowan University.

threat to their societies, defining it as a national security issue rather than a public policy problem, and demanding acceptance of extraordinary measures.

Approaching the pandemic as a security crisis is something one might expect among non-democratic regimes. Cloaking COVID-19 in the language of security enables autocrats to externalize its causes, divert attention away from low-performing health policies, exercise greater discretion in marshaling security resources and justify their use of coercive methods of social control. Indeed, many have noted the swelling authoritarian tendencies—increased state surveillance and the curtailment of freedoms of movement, press, and association, among others—deployed by non-democratic governments under the guise of pandemic control.

Dual Claims to Legitimacy in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian republic to officially confirm COVID-19 cases on its territory and declare a [state of emergency](#), which it did on March 15, 2020. Kazakhstan's rapid response to the coronavirus was led by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who has repeatedly acknowledged significant risks of the spread of coronavirus but deployed measured discourse mirroring that of the World Health Organization (WHO). Travel restrictions, suspension of operations of public transport and establishments, bans on mass gatherings, and tougher lockdown measures in major cities afforded exceptional powers to the newly created State Commission on Ensuring the State of Emergency. Military and police were called to take part in the implementation and enforcement of quarantines with more than 50,000 employees of the Minister of Interior, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Health working checkpoints and roadblocks around quarantine zones and medical facilities. Drones were used to keep track of unauthorized crossings, cell-phone apps monitored people's movement, and special task forces kept tabs on online communications about COVID-19.

While Kazakhstan's militarized response to the public health crisis and the heavy presence of law enforcement personnel conveyed a sense of urgency and a perception of threat, official discourse throughout this emergency period lacked a strong securitization message. The term "security" was not frequently used. If uttered, it sought to protect "people's lives" and "health," rather than the state or the nation, as referent objects.

The "anointed" successor to Nursultan Nazarbayev, Tokayev has operated in the shadow of the first president, initially deriving his own and his regime's legitimacy from Nazarbayev's domestic legacy and international reputation. In the last years of Nazarbayev's presidency, Kazakhstan faced growing political and economic challenges inherited by Tokayev. The orchestrated election of the second president in June 2019 was disrupted by public protests signaling growing popular discontent with the country's system of governance. The economic crises of 2008 and 2014 revealed serious structural deficiencies of the Kazakh economy—namely its dependence on petroleum exports. Tokayev's efforts to carve out an independent base of presidential power, therefore, entailed considerable risk to himself as well as the ruling Nur Sultan party if he were to

fail to deliver on his promises. The threat of elite insubordination or intra-elite conflict loomed large, and the parliamentary election scheduled for January 2021 was a major consideration in the president's approach to the pandemic.

Tokayev's discourse surrounding the pandemic, therefore, has emphasized the familiar themes of Kazakhstan's economic accomplishments attributed to his predecessor. He stressed that the country's extensive financial reserves built by Nazarbayev served as a guarantee of economic stability and continuity in fulfilling the state's "social obligations" to its people. The president has tried to position Kazakhstan as a regional leader in the fight with COVID-19 and lauded the work of his government in stabilizing the coronavirus situation in the republic. His speeches have been heavily tilted toward pledges of assistance to people, especially those who have lost their sources of income and had no economic safety net.

Nazarbayev, who was diagnosed with COVID-19 in mid-June, retreated from public view. His absence empowered Tokayev, who sought to enhance his independent stature and build up his own performance legitimacy distinct from Nazarbayev's. By mid-summer, however, the situation with the coronavirus significantly deteriorated, and the country was forced into a second lockdown on July 5, 2020. Although the president stressed the seriousness of the epidemiological situation and adverse consequences of the pandemic for public health as well as the country's economy and investment climate, the securitizing message remained weak and interspersed with the de-securitizing agenda.

Analysts attest that people's attitudes toward COVID-19 in Kazakhstan have mirrored the government's indecisiveness and inconsistencies in the public authorities' securitizing message. Many citizens did not heed the government's demand to wear masks, socially distance, or self-isolate, thus undermining the government's effort at containing the spread of infection.

Uzbekistan's Technocratic Response

With six initial cases detected by mid-March in Uzbekistan, the government put in place a range of emergency measures to prevent the rapid spread of infection. It suspended foreign travel and schools, closed borders, and canceled public gatherings and sporting events. The government certainly relied heavily on its police and internal security apparatus to enforce tight restrictions that effectively banned anyone (other than essential personnel) from leaving their homes. By late March, 3,000 members of various security agencies were [mobilized](#) as a "national guard" to monitor more than 5,000 homes and apartments where persons had been quarantined. The government also mobilized neighborhood and village (*mahalla*) committees to enforce a lockdown and imposed [fines](#) for those in public not wearing masks or for "hiding" someone who is infected with COVID-19. However, Uzbekistan's official rhetoric only occasionally portrayed the pandemic as an "external enemy," falling short of naming it a national security threat. The government effectively marshaled various lines of communication –

television, news media, bloggers, and spiritual leaders provided people with updates about the coronavirus situation at home and around the world.

Already by April 2020, the Uzbek government sought to frame its response as rapid and effective in controlling the pandemic. As it asserted greater control over information in an effort to monopolize discussion of the virus, the government began to disseminate messages of optimism as it openly framed its response as successful in reining in the virus' spread. As in many other countries, the reopening was followed by a surge in new cases, by some reports an exponential increase of new infections, which led to a second shutdown by the government in July.

For President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his administration, full-scale securitization was a risky choice inconsistent with the principles of technocratic governance in running the state and its economy. These principles have been central to the legitimizing strategy of Mirziyoyev. In contrast, the Karimov regime buttressed its claims to legitimacy in the lofty promises of security, political stability, unique national identity, and economic development. In reality, the regime leaned on a corrupt system in which elites lived off extensive rents in exchange for allegiance to the Karimov administration. The latter relied on the fear of prosecution by an extensive ring of security institutions to sustain political stability.

Upon coming to office in 2016, Mirziyoyev has pursued several policy changes to distinguish his administration from the preceding Karimov era. Alongside other legitimization strategies (such as a more open foreign policy and a limited civil society) was a new, very public turn toward effective, technocratic governance and policy reform. Mirziyoyev's aim was not necessarily to build democracy in his country but to create a more prosperous, reputable, and globally integrated Uzbekistan and to build his legacy through economic modernization, a fight against corruption, and technocratic governance.

When the health crisis descended on Uzbekistan, it had a rather balanced economy and trade relations, low levels of dependency on commodity exports, and diversified exports. Still [poorly integrated](#) into global supply chains, Uzbekistan was not much affected by the fragmentation of the global economy due to COVID-19. Having built financial reserves, the government was able to implement a set of measures to minimize the impact on the shutdown, including a loosening of taxation on selected industries (tourism, transportation, light industry) readjustment of loans, the waiver of fines on overdue debts, and establishment of an anti-crisis fund of \$1 billion.

A series of health policies were initiated as well. In response to shortages of food and medicine, state controls on food prices and medical supplies were implemented. The official rhetoric has underscored its effective actions, although it was implemented at an enormous economic cost.

The government understands that these economic crisis measures are unsustainable, and it has faced another economic problem—the decrease of remittances from Uzbek migrant workers, which are expected to [drop by 35 percent](#) (equivalent to 5 percent of Uzbekistan’s GDP). While dealing with the economic consequences of the health crisis, the Mirziyoyev government was tested by another disaster: a newly built [dam collapsed](#) near the town of Sardoba in June 2020, forcing nearly 70,000 residents of Uzbekistan and 5,400 residents of Kazakhstan out of their homes. The government’s [response](#) to the disaster demonstrated the desire of the new administration to project competence in crisis management, but it also revealed its fear of popular unrest in the face of crisis, thus underscoring the cracks in the government’s legitimacy and the president’s concerns with his reputation.

To date, Mirziyoyev’s reforms have not only failed to stamp out pervasive corruption in the country but also inflamed people’s resistance to the corrupt elite, [triggering](#) demonstrations in response to property expropriations. Fearing that the COVID-19 crisis may further exacerbate these tensions, the Mirziyoyev administration chose to frontline an image of effective policy response over securitization, consistent with its much emphasized technocratic capacity.

A Leadership Vacuum in Kyrgyzstan

On the surface, Kyrgyzstan’s response to the pandemic reflected that of its neighbors. Having announced the first COVID-19 cases in March 2020, the government declared a state of emergency and issued decrees that imposed strict quarantine measures in several areas most affected by the virus spread. To enforce the lockdown, the government instituted commandants’ offices under the Ministry of Interior and set up police checkpoints across the cities. However, from the beginning, Kyrgyzstan’s response was impaired by disorderly government communications.

Short of further guidance, the swiftly imposed lockdowns resulted in inconsistent application of new rules and a [surge](#) of abusive behavior by police and security personnel. Kyrgyzstani citizens received infrequent official information concerning the main government’s decisions that were dubbed “[bureaucratic alibies](#)” because their vague formulations raised doubt regarding their purpose and intent. The government’s clampdown on freedom of information—criminalizing the spread of allegedly false information regarding COVID-19 and denying accreditation to non-state media outlets during the state of emergency—created a vacuum of open, reliable, and accessible information.

Lack of clear leadership in spearheading the anti-COVID-19 campaign set Kyrgyzstan’s response apart from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The statements of different government representatives about restrictions often contradicted each other, and public officials, including then-President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, fell flat in their responsibility to model proper behavior by refusing to wear masks themselves or appearing for photo opportunities in mass gatherings.

This vacuum of leadership was a product of Kyrgyzstan's unique (for Central Asia) parliamentary system, where power (and legitimacy) was divided among the office of the president, the unicameral parliament (*Zhogorku Kenesh*), and the government (Cabinet of Ministers) with the different branches of power and individuals and agencies loath to take on responsibility for waging a concerted response to COVID-19. This was compounded by the lack of confidence of citizens in their government that has roots in poor political and economic performance by subsequent administrations. The fear of economic collapse and widespread public discontent engendered by it weighed heavily on the authorities' decisions concerning COVID-19.

Jeenbekov was elected in October 2017, marking the first peaceful transition of power in Kyrgyzstan. At first, he relied on the support of the ruling Social Democratic Party (SDPK) and the endorsement of his predecessor Almazbek Atambayev. In the following two years, SDPK fell apart as a result of a feud between Atambayev and his successor, and in June 2019, Atambayev was stripped of his immunity from prosecution and charged with corruption. By the time of the COVID-19 outbreak, the risks of political instability in the country were running high. Splinter groups that had broken off from the SDPK formed new opposition parties threatening the dominant position of the SDPK in the parliament. Public discontent and protests over government corruption and border skirmishes with neighbors were on the rise.

Kyrgyzstan's political elites were aware of their poor standing. With the trial drama involving the former president and his supporters unfolding in front of their eyes, a fractured political landscape, and reports of embezzlement of public and international funds during the pandemic, the authorities chose to seek stricter control over information to stave off public unrest and resorted to electoral fraud in advance of the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2020. Widespread electoral irregularities during the parliamentary election triggered mass demonstrations that escalated in violence. To avert further turmoil, Jeenbekov announced his resignation, paving the way for the meteoric rise of the [controversial](#) leader Sadyr Japarov. As a result of this leadership vacuum and the diffusion of legitimacy across its legislative and executive branches, the government never advanced a coherent discourse, securitizing or otherwise.

Conclusion

Despite its apparent benefits, the securitization of COVID-19 in Central Asia was inconsistent, constrained, and shaped by the underlying claims of regime legitimacy in each country. While the legitimation challenges differ in each case—facing dual assertions of presidential power in Kazakhstan, preserving an image of technocratic reform in Uzbekistan, and succumbing to a leadership vacuum in Kyrgyzstan—they have made it difficult for Central Asia's regimes to employ securitizing discourses that have worked in the past. As a result, leaders in Central Asia have one less instrument in what Edward Schatz calls a [soft authoritarian toolkit](#), making it difficult to disguise denial, obfuscation, and misdirection within the rhetoric of securitization.

Part IV.
Reshaping State-Society Relations

Organizational Resilience

RUSSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 663

July 2020

Andrei Semenov¹

Perm State University; Yale University

Vsevolod Bederson²

Perm State University

As the COVID-19 pandemic struck Russia in late March 2020 and state responses looked weak and indecisive, civil society did not hesitate to step in. For example, almost 200 million rubles (\$2.8 million) was raised by the NGO union *Chto delat'* ("What is to be done?") to help medical workers, and organizations like *Razvitie migratsii* ("Migrant Development") provided essential aid to labor migrants. Such efforts set a tone of national selflessness, prompting analysts to contend that civil society organizations filled the void created by the failures of Russia's autocratic regime. As it was, the state did come to recognize the power of civil society groups in countering the pandemic. In many regions, such as Perm, Samara, and Leningrad, COVID-19 emergency teams included representatives from the third sector—charity, volunteer, and NGO fields—often those related to healthcare.

In this policy memo, we argue that Russia's preparedness for emergency situations stems from several decades of organizational development and accumulation of knowledge and expertise in the field. Previous crises have contributed to organizational resilience—a set of attitudes and techniques that help mitigate the impact of systemic shocks. Nonetheless, we also see growing attempts by the state to divide civil society through selective funding, co-optation, and labeling. Such re-occurring actions threaten to undermine the sources of resilience and, eventually, the autonomy of the field.

Russian Civil Society Organizations Amidst COVID-19

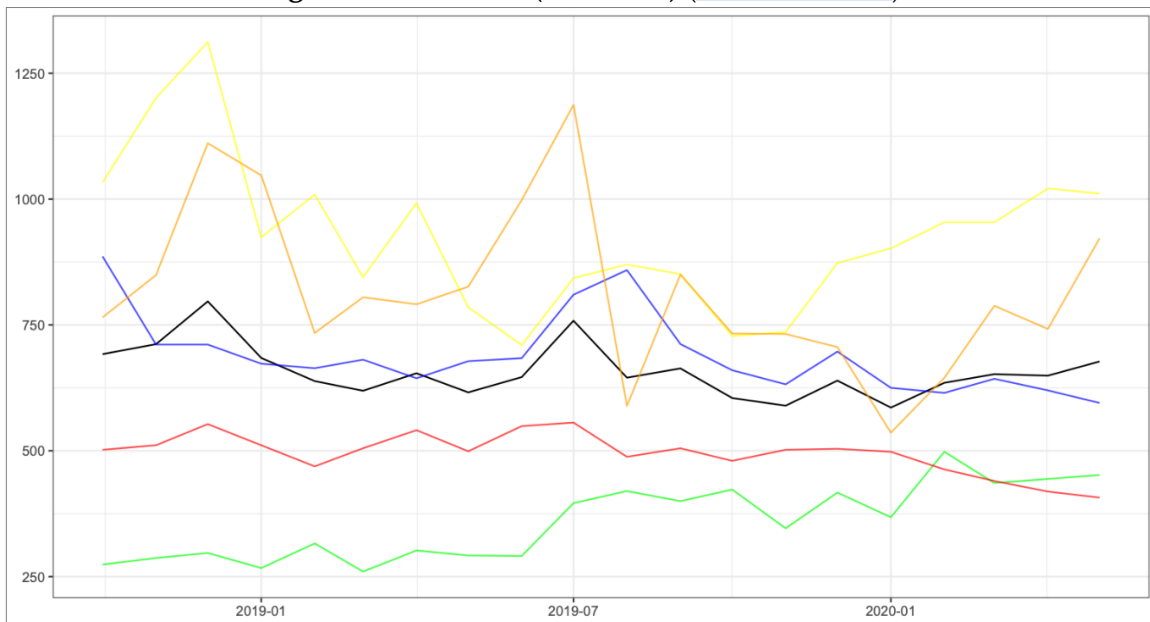
COVID-19 hit Russia later than the United States and Europe, yet the country's tally of infected quickly climbed in late March. The government responded with swift measures: closing the borders, restricting movement within the country, and imposing quarantine-like restrictions that varied from one region to another.

¹ Andrei Semenov is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Perm State University and Associate Research Scholar at the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University.

² Vsevolod Bederson is a Doctoral Candidate in Politics, and Researcher at the Center for Comparative History and Politics, at Perm State University.

For civil society organizations, these measures meant the disruption of their operations and unclear prospects for survival. In parallel to the pandemic, the economy was hit by plummeting oil prices; consequently, worries about financial sustainability spread throughout. Large institutional donors like the foundations run by Vladimir Potanin and Gennady Timchenko pledged to allocate additional funding. Others like Mitya Aleshkovskiy's *Nuzhna Pomoshch* ("Need Help") organized fundraising and promotional campaigns. Individual donations remained at pre-pandemic levels—between 700 and 750 rubles on average—according to the Benchmarking NGOs project (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Donations (2019-2020) (www.tochno.st)



Key: monthly average donations total (black); to social help (yellow); to education, science, and culture (orange); to human rights (blue); to medicine (red); to the environment (green)

From the state, the Public Chamber and All-Russian People's Front proposed a number of measures in support of civil society organizations in late March that included tax breaks, grace periods for rent and insurance payments, extension or postponement of regular inspections, and remote management procedures. Several coalitions petitioned the government with similar ideas. The government responded positively: on April 1, during a meeting with President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin announced a moratorium on inspections for socially oriented NGOs, or SONGOs³, alongside subsidies and tax breaks. Ex-premier Dmitry Medvedev, in his capacity as chair of United Russia, held an online meeting with representatives of the third sector on April 21 and supported the relief package for SONGOs. The process culminated at a

³ SONGOs are registered, non-profit organizations that target a wide spectrum of social issues such as relief operations, support for vulnerable categories of citizens, environmental protection, philanthropy, culture, science, and education. The Russian Ministry of Economic Development and regional authorities manage the list of SONGOs.

meeting between Putin and activists of *My vmeste* (“We’re together”) on April 20. Among other aspects, the president proposed preferential loans for SONGOs to sustain wages, additional benefits and payments for COVID-related work, and tax deductions for private companies donating money or goods to groups. On top of this, Putin pledged 3 billion rubles in presidential grants in addition to the 4.6 billion already earmarked for the first half of the year.

Apart from funding, civil society organizations faced the challenge of remote work. As many organizations concentrated their efforts on helping the most vulnerable categories (homeless, migrants, elderly, and drug addicts), the restrictions on physical movement disrupted their traditional means of service delivery. Nevertheless, according to a survey of 232 civil society organizations from 48 regions conducted by KAF in late March 2020, three quarters of the organizations reported that they did not scale down their operations, with only 7 percent stating that they could no longer work. In a later poll (May/June), 49 percent of the organizations reported that they had launched new programs and projects. These surveys also indicated the adaptability of civil society organizations to a changing environment. For 48 percent of the respondents in the March survey, the pandemic presented an opportunity to invest in strategic and organizational development. Others indicated that they would like to allocate resources to online fundraising, learn more about constituencies, reduce costs, and raise efficiency. On the flip side, 23 percent saw no advantages in the current situation.

Sources of Civil Society Resilience

This is not the first crisis that Russian civil society has faced during the presidency of Putin. The legislative changes in 2006 coupled with the global economic crisis in 2008-09, decimated the number of non-governmental organizations in Russia. It forced some major foreign donors to leave the country and introduced more stringent rules of financial reporting and operations. Despite the growing pressure from the state and economic strains, the sector rebounded in the early 2010s with numerous initiatives and organizations emerging before and after the 2011-12 “For Fair Elections!” campaign. Likewise, the strength of civil society as a “rapid response system” to natural disasters was proven during the fight against wildfires in the summer of 2010. Likewise, during the flood in Krymsk in Krasnodar in the spring of 2012, the volunteers and NGOs were the first to provide aid and relief operations.

The regime reacted to the growing civic capacity in 2011-12 by adopting a “foreign agents law” in 2012 as well a law on “undesirable organizations” in 2015. Among other goals, these measures were aimed at de-linking the nascent coordination between non-political civic groups and the political opposition. The vague definition of “political activity” allowed the regime to target not only its obvious critics—electoral watchdogs, human rights and environmental NGOs—but the whole third sector since a large share of the field relied on foreign funding. Any public interview or meeting with public officials could now be counted as “political influence.” Though the number of the organizations on the list of “foreign agents” never exceeded 160 (70 as of April 2020), the

threat of being included in the registry forced the sector to revise their international sources of funding. Moreover, in many cases, the law targeted the most influential and advanced organizations such as *Obshchestvennyi verdikt* (“Public Verdict”) and *Memorial*, which spread fears further.

Simultaneously, the regime increased its financial aid to the sector. Through presidential grants and governmental subsidies (federal and regional), the regime allocated substantial funds for SONGOs that deal with acute social problems like homelessness, drug and alcohol addicts, migrants, disaster relief, and so forth. The annual amount of funds disbursed via all programs rose from 4.8 billion rubles in 2012 to 12.2 billion in 2018. The Ministry of Economic Development—the major operator of the governmental subsidies for SONGOs—reported in 2019 that 3,804 organizations received financial help from the state and their services were delivered to more than 60 million Russians.

In short, the experience of operating in an environment where resource flows are unstable and access to them are heavily regulated by the state constantly pushed civil society organizations in Russia toward innovation. Three sources of resilience stand apart: the diversity of organizational forms and resource flows, and the density of communication within the sector. As our earlier study of organizational responses to the “foreign agents” law indicates, the opportunity to choose between different organizational forms is important in dealing with environmental challenges. For example, to avoid labeling and prosecution, some organizations preferred to continue their activity as an informal group. This “stay under the radar” strategy is also important for many civic initiatives that do not want to deal with cumbersome state regulations. Alternatively, the expansion of operations pushed initially informal groups toward legal incorporation.

Likewise, the diversity of resource flows contributed to the development of specific organizational skills and operational procedures. Different funds come with different conditionalities, and civil society groups recognized that with money comes responsibility. Those working with public funds admitted that stringent spending and reporting rules forced them to enhance their standard operating procedures in order to comply. Finally, public fundraising campaigns and management of volunteer networks required the acquisition of specific organizational skills. Here, an important role has been taken on by resource centers and information hubs, such as those run by the *GRANI-Center*, that facilitate information within the sector and help promote best practices.

United We Stand, Divided We End?

The increasing intervention of the state in civil society produces an uneven distribution of risks and benefits across the field. As access to resource flows becomes conditional on cooperation with the state, civil society organizations working on issues politically sensitive to the regime like human rights, environment, and minorities face the dangers of deinstitutionalisation and extinction. And it is not only the lack of resources—the

divisive narrative produced by the regime that highlights the “reliable partners of the state and society,” as Putin put it in a meeting with *My vmeste* activists, leans toward disrupting other civil society efforts aimed at building trust and linkages with society. More generally, the state strategy undermines the sources of resilience: it stimulates certain types of activity and encourages the use of public funding for it. This comes with a price: as one of our academic discussants mentioned back in 2015: “Dependence on state funding is like a needle. When you get accustomed to specific funding, you can no longer orient toward alternatives. Step after step, the state demands more: new rules, new requirements, new accents, new priorities.”

The institutional consequence of this strategy is preferential access to state funding. For example, the relief package for NGOs introduced by the government that includes tax breaks, grace periods for payments, and low-rate subsidized loans, among other measures, are circumscribed to two lists of organizations. The first list comprises 23,373 NGOs that have received state subsidies or grants since 2017, social and public service providers, and religious organizations and their subsidiaries. Following community complaints, the Ministry added a second list that extended benefits to charities, research, education, cultural, and sport organizations (9,501 NGOs). The remaining 170,000 civil society organizations, alongside unregistered entities, have to survive without government support.

Locally, state agents continue to intimidate civil society organizations that prefer to retain autonomy rather than cooperate with the regime. This way, for example, the independent *Alyans vrachey* (“Alliance of Medics”) raised 6.8 million rubles in April and an additional 2.3 million in May to deliver individual protection kits to public health workers. In some regions, the authorities denied access to hospitals or even prevented the service teams from entering the cities.

What Comes Next?

Over the last two decades, civil society in Russia has accumulated impressive organizational skills and knowledge that allows it not only to survive but to effectively respond to challenges such as those presented by COVID-19. The pandemic has shown the resilience of civil society’s organizational flexibility, its experience maximizing output from limited resources, its dense communication abilities, and its deep linkages with society at large. Over time, it has handled adversity and restrictions. However, the continuing encroachment and diversionary policies of the state threaten the existence of specific organizations and, in the long run, undermine citizens’ efforts to build robust civil society structures. There are signs today that civil society in Russia has grown stronger, but the aftermath of the pandemic will reveal its resilience and limits.

COVID-19 in Russia: What Russians Expected, What They Got, and What They Think About It

PONARS Policy Memo No. 691
February 2021

Sarah Wilson Sokhey¹
University of Colorado Boulder

The coronavirus pandemic in Russia posed the same myriad challenges as in many countries: a devastating loss of life, strained healthcare resources, and an economic crisis. In Russia's case, the pandemic also came at a politically sensitive time during which the country voted on and passed a constitutional referendum. After initially banning foreigners from China and emphasizing the disease as a foreign threat in February 2020, the regions of Russia had adopted strict lockdowns, including digital pass systems, by late March and early April. Lockdown, however, did not last long. The government rapidly reversed course in June, opening up the country and making big vaccine promises in the lead-up to the referendum overhauling the constitution in July. Ultimately, the Russian response was an uncoordinated plan that devolved into a minimalist approach pinning its main hopes on a vaccine rollout. Outside observers and Russians alike are skeptical about the accuracy of official COVID-19 numbers, but even the official numbers have not been reassuring.

This memo addresses three important questions about COVID-19 in Russia: what Russians expect from the government, what they have gotten, and what they think about it. Russian public opinion combines low expectations, concern, skepticism, and acceptance. Surveys conducted in 2020 reveal that expectations for government-provided healthcare were already low. The government's pandemic response was inconsistent and has relied heavily on a vaccine over prevention. The Russian public is concerned about COVID-19 and questions official numbers, but many still approve of the leaders' response. In short, the Russian public as a whole is more or less satisfied with the government's efforts. Despite a bungled response, there is little evidence that the pandemic crisis itself will significantly undermine support for Putin, United Russia, or the current regime.

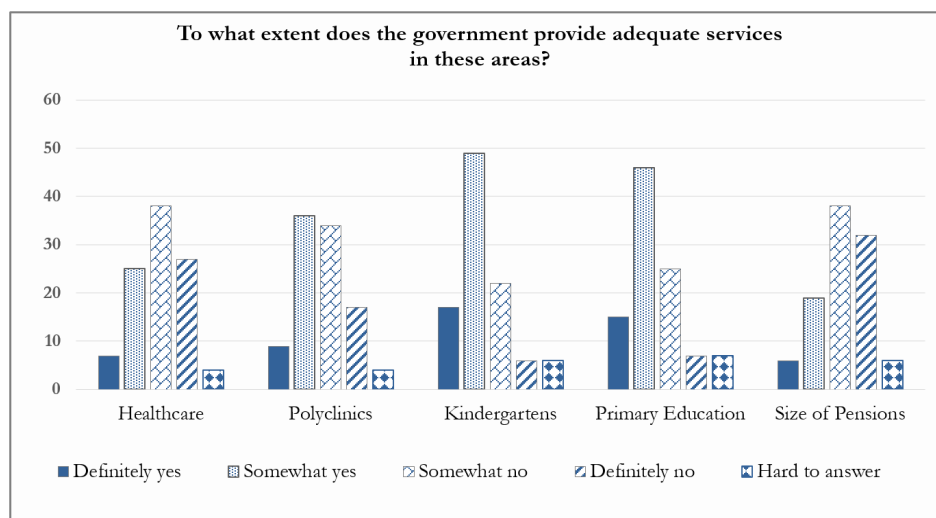
¹ [Sarah Wilson Sokhey](#) is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Colorado Boulder.

What Do Russians Expect from the Government?

Survey data from February 2020 give us a better idea of what Russians expected the government to provide regarding social services right as the pandemic was beginning.² At the time of writing in January 2021, it appears that Russians did not expect very much, and their expectations were met. **Figure 1** below shows the results of a question asking respondents to evaluate to what extent the Russian government provided adequate services in five different areas: healthcare, polyclinics, kindergartens, primary education, and the size of pensions. The possible responses included definitely yes, somewhat yes, definitely no, somewhat no, and hard to answer.

In relation to understanding public reactions to the government's response to COVID-19, healthcare is one of the important dimensions. In the survey, the distinction between healthcare writ large and polyclinics is significant. The healthcare system includes hospitals and the system as a whole. Polyclinics are the primary care providers for most day-to-day healthcare provision. Furthermore, we can see that the responses differ for healthcare as a whole compared to the system of polyclinics, with the latter being evaluated somewhat more positively. For both healthcare and polyclinics, less than 10 percent of respondents said that the government definitely provides adequate care, reflecting a pervasive opinion that these services could be much better. About 25 percent of respondents thought that government-provided healthcare was somewhat adequate compared to 35 percent who thought polyclinic care was somewhat adequate.

Figure 1



Notably, the vast majority of Russians (68 percent) do not think that government-provided healthcare is adequate. Just under half of the respondents evaluate polyclinics as somewhat or definitely inadequate. By comparison, Russians are much more positive

² This is an original survey question included on a survey conducted by the Levada Survey Organization in February 2020. Data are available upon request.

in their assessments of government-provided kindergartens and primary education. Even pension provision—an often contentious and hotly contested issue in Russia—is ranked more positively than government-provided healthcare.

What do healthcare expectations mean for how Russians might react to COVID-19 policies? Although speculative, there are two possibilities that stand out. First, low evaluations of government-provided healthcare could mean that Russians are primed to negatively assess the government’s response to the pandemic. Alternately, it may be that a low bar is easier to meet. If the Russian government’s response to COVID-19 outstrips low expectations, then Russians might be primed to be either positive or at least accepting of the government’s response.

Certainly, many governments around the world could have done better in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Russian response was not as strict or consistent as some of its European counterparts, but Russia also [faces unique challenges](#) in having a much larger population spread out over a federal system with a huge urban-rural divide in administrative capacity, socioeconomic conditions, and the quality of healthcare. Unsurprisingly, there is a great deal of [regional variation](#) in how well the pandemic has been managed. This raises important questions about what the government was able to do and how its citizens evaluated its response.

What Did Russians Get?

The Russian government provided a mixed response that has come recently to rely on promises of mass vaccination. Marlene Laruelle and Madeline McCann [identified](#) an early post-Soviet model of COVID-19 response, which relied on downplaying the threat. It is likely that this was at least in part a strategic decision based on the very real limitations of state capacity in some post-Soviet states like Russia and Belarus. Because officials were aware of the state’s very serious and real limitations in being able to respond to a health crisis, they opted instead to tell the public that the threat of COVID-19 was low.

Russia, like some other countries, followed four stages in its COVID-19 response in 2020.

Phase 1: downplaying and xenophobia. From February to mid-March 2020, the Russian government focused on COVID-19 as a foreign threat. Russian [police](#) and [citizens](#) harassed Asians in the country, and military transports from Russia to China were [restricted](#). In February 2020, the government began restricting the entry of foreigners from China into Russia but also announced [five vaccine prototypes](#). Even in early March, Putin was downplaying the threat, [claiming](#) false news reports were being distributed in Russia to incite panic. In March, the government announced a “non-working period” and the closure of some public places and buildings.

Phase 2: lockdown in some regions. In mid to late March, it quickly became apparent that COVID-19 was indeed a serious threat, and infections were rapidly rising, especially

in urban areas. In April, 21 regions of Russia, including Moscow, [introduced](#) a digital pass system. Moscow instituted [checkpoints](#) to enforce the digital pass system. The municipality announced the building of [temporary hospitals](#) to treat COVID-19 patients.

Phase 3: reopening and vaccine promises. Beginning in June, Russian leadership quickly pivoted to [reopening](#) and [promising](#) a vaccine. This was an abrupt change from previous announcements by Moscow mayor Sergei Sobianin that lockdown would last until a vaccine was available.

Phase 4: second wave and vaccine rollout. An abrupt increase in infections was apparent beginning in September 2020. Schools in Moscow were [shut down again](#), and COVID-19 infection numbers continued to rise through the fall and winter of 2020. The daily number of new infections being reported by *The Moscow Times* [peaked on December 26](#), but thousands of new cases were being reported every day through January. The Sputnik-V vaccine is now being administered and bought by other countries but is in [short supply](#) in many Russian regions.

Many countries followed some variant of these 4 phases. The distinctive features of the Russian response were the early reopening in summer and the very early promises about the Sputnik-V vaccine. Ultimately, Russia does not appear to be rolling out its vaccine significantly earlier than other countries, but it was among the first to promise that the vaccine was coming. This reflects the government's emphasis on the vaccine and not preventing the spread of infections. In all likelihood, the government chose this path as a strategic choice. The high inequality of care between urban and rural areas, the federal nature of Russian governance, and the variable administrative capacity of regions made it unlikely that Russia could enact and enforce a nationwide lockdown. Given this, the government did not even attempt a more coordinated response. This also meant, of course, that the Russian government accepted that many Russians would die before the vaccine could be developed, produced, and administered.

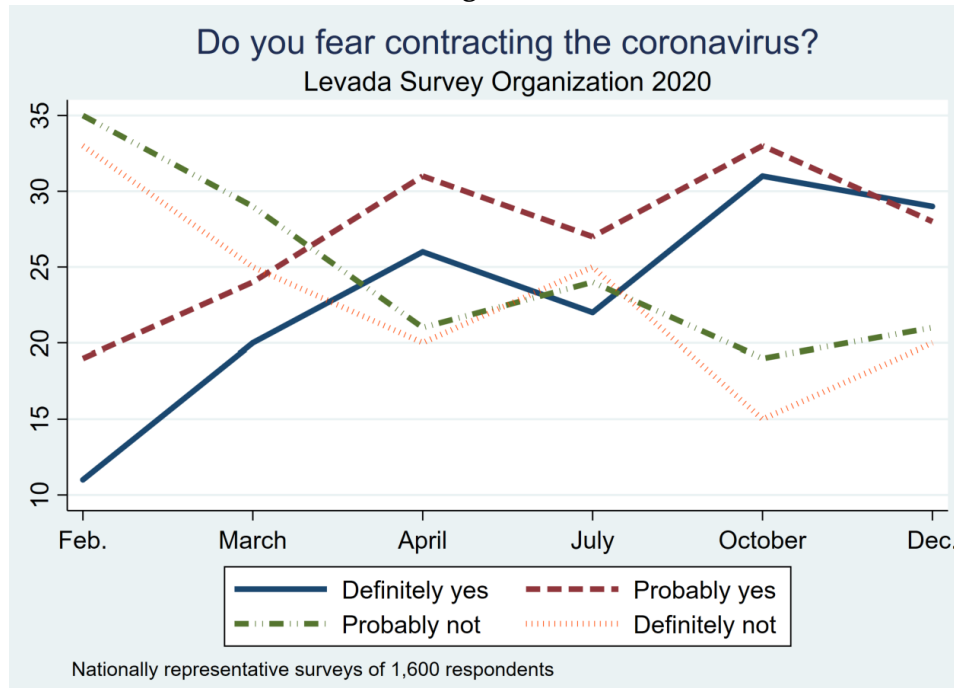
What Do Russians Think About It?

There is no major public backlash to the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, the only protests about the government's handling of the pandemic have been a few [anti-vaccine protests](#) backed by the Communist Party in Moscow. **Figure 2** shows the results of [surveys](#) taken throughout 2020 asking whether respondents fear contracting the coronavirus. In December 2020, the percentage of Russians who definitely or probably feared contracting the coronavirus was at nearly 60 percent, which is as high as it was in April. There is a notable dip in concern about contracting coronavirus in July when infection rates had declined.

In spring 2020, only [16 percent](#) of Russians fully trusted official information about the coronavirus situation in Russia, while 38 percent somewhat trusted official information. More than a quarter of the population reported that they absolutely did not trust the official information. Despite the government's reliance on a vaccine strategy, vaccine

skepticism is also high. Surveys conducted by Levada from August to December 2020 indicate that 36-38 percent of Russians are willing to get the vaccine and roughly 60 percent are not.

Figure 2



Despite a fear of contracting the coronavirus and significant skepticism about official information, about [60 percent](#) of Russians somewhat or completely approve of how regional leaders addressed COVID-19 in October 2020. This is the same approval rating of regional leaders' responses that Russians gave in May, although many more respondents now say they somewhat approve of regional responses instead of completely approving. Approval of Putin's handling of coronavirus in May was similarly high, with 60 percent of respondents completely or somewhat approving.

Furthermore, even in April 2020, many Russians were [not working at home](#). Only 8 percent reported working at home more, 13 percent reported being fully remote, and 8 percent reported that they were on obligatory leave with pay. By July after the reopening, only 7 percent reported working at home more, 5 percent were fully remote, and less than 1 percent were on leave with pay.

Before the pandemic hit Russia in earnest, Russians were giving largely negative assessments of government-run healthcare. An important remaining question is if Russians are concerned and skeptical about the present situation, who do they hold responsible? And what are their expectations about what the government can actually provide versus what the government would ideally provide?

Conclusions and Looking Ahead

Much depends on how extensively and how quickly the Russian public will be vaccinated. The Kremlin has touted the Sputnik-V vaccine as among the best in the world. Recently, private clinics in Moscow attempted to get permission to administer the Pfizer and Modern vaccines before they were officially approved but were denied. Schools [reopened](#) for all schoolchildren on January 25, despite the still high number of daily infections being reported and the fact that the majority of teachers have not been vaccinated.

Before the onset, the Russian public's expectations for the government's response to a pandemic were primed to be low, and the government has largely met that low standard. Nonetheless, the ongoing loss of lives and economic devastation has been stoking some discontent with the government. As many countries struggle to address the pandemic, it may be likely, however, that Russians will come to blame the pandemic's consequences not on leaders but bad luck. With the government's response in keeping with general public expectation, major dissatisfactions far have not been provoked, and the pandemic crisis itself has not been significantly undermining support for the regime.

Linkages between Experiencing COVID-19 and Levels of Political Support in Russia

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 677
November 2020

Margarita Zavadskaya¹
European University at St. Petersburg; University of Helsinki

Boris Sokolov²
Higher School of Economics (St. Petersburg)

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has left noticeable traces in everyday life of Russian society. Eighty percent of Russians had to alter their lifestyles due to the virus, with half [reporting](#) that their incomes shrank, and this share keeps growing. Has the pandemic also affected how Russian citizens feel about their government? To explore how the pandemic has affected political support in Russia, we analyzed data from a representative online panel survey, “Values in Crisis,” carried out by the Laboratory for Comparative Social Research at the Higher School of Economics (LCSR, HSE).

We looked at four indicators of support: confidence in (1) the Russian government, (2) the health sector, and (3) the country’s institutions as a whole, as well as respondents’ opinions on (4) how well the government is handling the coronavirus crisis. We found that actual encounters with COVID-19 and the public healthcare system are negatively, although weakly, associated with all four indicators. We also found that the fear of getting sick moderately positively correlates with assessments of the government’s response to the crisis. Reported negative economic impacts do not seem to affect political trust and support. Strikingly, the most distrusting group of respondents are the so-called “COVID-19-dissidents,” who consistently scored low on all measures due to their refusal to take COVID-19 seriously.

¹ [Margarita Zavadskaya](#) is Research Fellow at the European University at St. Petersburg, Postdoctoral Researcher in the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki, and Senior Research Fellow in the Ronald F. Inglehart Laboratory for Comparative Social Research at the Higher School of Economics (St. Petersburg).

² [Boris Sokolov](#) is Associate Professor and Senior Research Fellow in the Ronald F. Inglehart Laboratory for Comparative Social Research at the Higher School of Economics (St. Petersburg).

Dealing with Distress: Expectations vs. Experience

Previous research suggests that external shocks such as natural disasters or epidemics may lead to a temporary consolidation of political support around the government, or the “rally ‘round the flag” effect. Effective government response may [facilitate](#) the growth of political support. This is what happened in South Korea when the incumbent Democratic party [obtained](#) an absolute majority of seats after the government successfully managed the pandemic. Not all governments have coped with COVID-19 as well as South Korea. Several countries exhibited declining governmental approval ratings, such as the [United States](#).

It is difficult to conclude unambiguously whether the Russian government’s anti-epidemic measures are a success or failure. At the end of August, for example, Russia was in fourth place in the world ranking of countries with the largest number of COVID-19 cases (985,346, on August 29), but the official death toll (17,025) was relatively low (12th place in the world). There have been some allegations that the official mortality rates are underestimated. Existing evidence about the political effects of the pandemic is limited and contradictory. For instance, Levada Center polls [registered](#) “historical minimums” of 59 percent of political support for President Vladimir Putin, even while the state-owned polling VTSiOM agency reported stable ratings for him and even an increase in support for him after his April speeches.

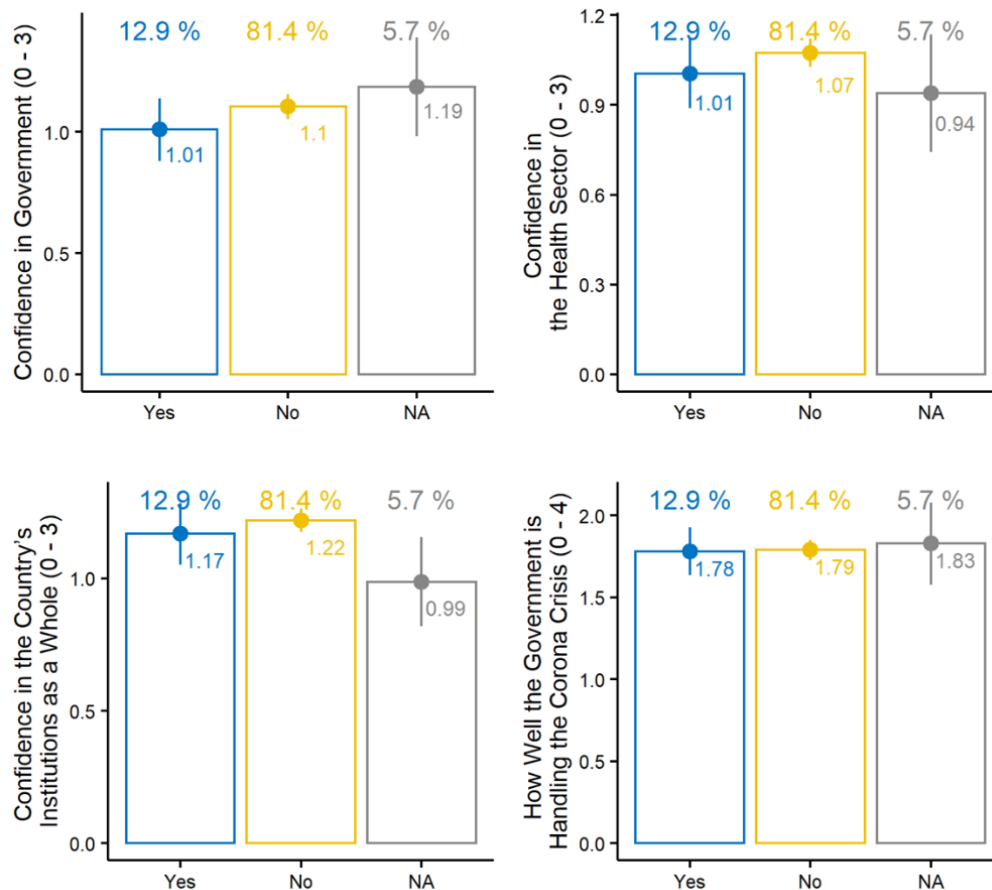
Do those who did encounter the virus differ in terms of support for the government from those who did not? Some studies of natural disasters suggest that those who were directly exposed to damaging events tend to be more supportive of the existing government as (1) they [observed](#) the public services in action (of course, if government response was effective) and (2) the origin of the threat is completely exogenous and uncontrolled by anyone, so the government [cannot](#) be blamed for it.

On the other hand, the impact of large-scale infectious outbreaks may differ from the political effects of other natural disasters since the negative outcomes are not produced instantly or in a short time period but are distributed more or less evenly across a relatively large time span. The duration of the outbreak may prevent rally effects because of (1) the lack of a single triggering event, which helps to synchronize individual emotions, and (2) issue fatigue. Still, these outcomes are not localized to a specific exposed area but may affect virtually everyone. Such uncertainty may cause severe anxiety among those having not been affected yet. In turn, anxiety may invoke the need for protection and hence boosts support for the government.

Furthermore, except for a few vulnerable groups (primarily elderly people or people with chronic health conditions), the COVID-19 infection is not especially hard and dangerous for infected individuals. Most of them demonstrate only mild or moderate symptoms. So, it would be an exaggeration to label every individual case as a “disaster.” According to this reasoning, one may expect that the actual experience of the coronavirus should not systematically affect the level of political support among

infected people, while anxiety about the virus may be a more important predictor of support.

Figure 1. Experiencing COVID-19 (X axis) and Political Support (Y axis)



The plots show mean values by groups with 95 percent confidence intervals. NA—no answer. Percentages demonstrate the shares of respondents in each group. N = 1,527. Source: "Values in Crisis" survey, LCSR HSE.

Evidence from a nationally representative online panel survey that was carried out from June 10 to 16th shows that the share of Russian citizens directly exposed to the coronavirus is relatively small compared to the share of those who had to change their lifestyle irrespective of the exposure to the virus (see **Figure 1**). The overall number of respondents who have been diagnosed with the coronavirus is small: only 1.4 percent of the respondents mentioned positive test results. If to widen the definition of "COVID-19 experience" by including those who mentioned symptoms similar to COVID-19, this number grows up to 6.9 percent of the sample. Adding the cases of family members who were diagnosed with COVID-19 leaves us with 12.9 percent of the respondents reporting a (more or less) close encounter with the virus. Notably, 5.7 percent refused to give an answer, which may suggest that this topic is somewhat sensitive to the respondents.

One way or another, experiencing the disease is associated with a slight decrease in confidence in government, but the effect's size is almost negligible— just 0.1 on a 0-3-scale. The level of trust in the healthcare system and political institutions is also somewhat lower among those who encountered the virus, although the differences here are even smaller (0.06 and 0.05, respectively). All these differences fail to reach statistical significance. In addition, the experience of the disease is completely unrelated to the level of satisfaction with how effectively the government is coping with the situation. In contrast to this, the fear of getting sick (for the respondents themselves and their relatives) positively correlates with the approval of the government's anti-pandemic policies.³ Importantly, around 60 percent of the respondents reported high rates of concerns for their (or their relatives') health. So, it seems that in Russia, anxiety is a more important correlate of political support than the actual experience of the disease.

The Rise of Economic Concerns and the Blame Game

Yet, the pandemic is not limited to a physiological experience. According to [FOM surveys](#), around half of the respondents are afraid to lose employment due to the pandemic or its consequences. The scholarly literature on retrospective voting teaches us that economic concerns often lead to a decrease in political support and turn citizens into a more critical mode. This is true for Russia as well: the economic turmoil of the 1990s as well as the financial crisis of 2008 unavoidably provoked political discontent in [one form](#) or [another](#). The only exception was the massive rallying in 2014 when the blame for the negative economic consequences of the annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbas was [largely attributed](#) to foreign sanctions. Nonetheless, even in that case, the only beneficiary of the “rallying ‘round the flag” was for Putin—not for any other political actors or institutions. Later, in 2018, pension reform put an end to his “Teflon” presidential rating.

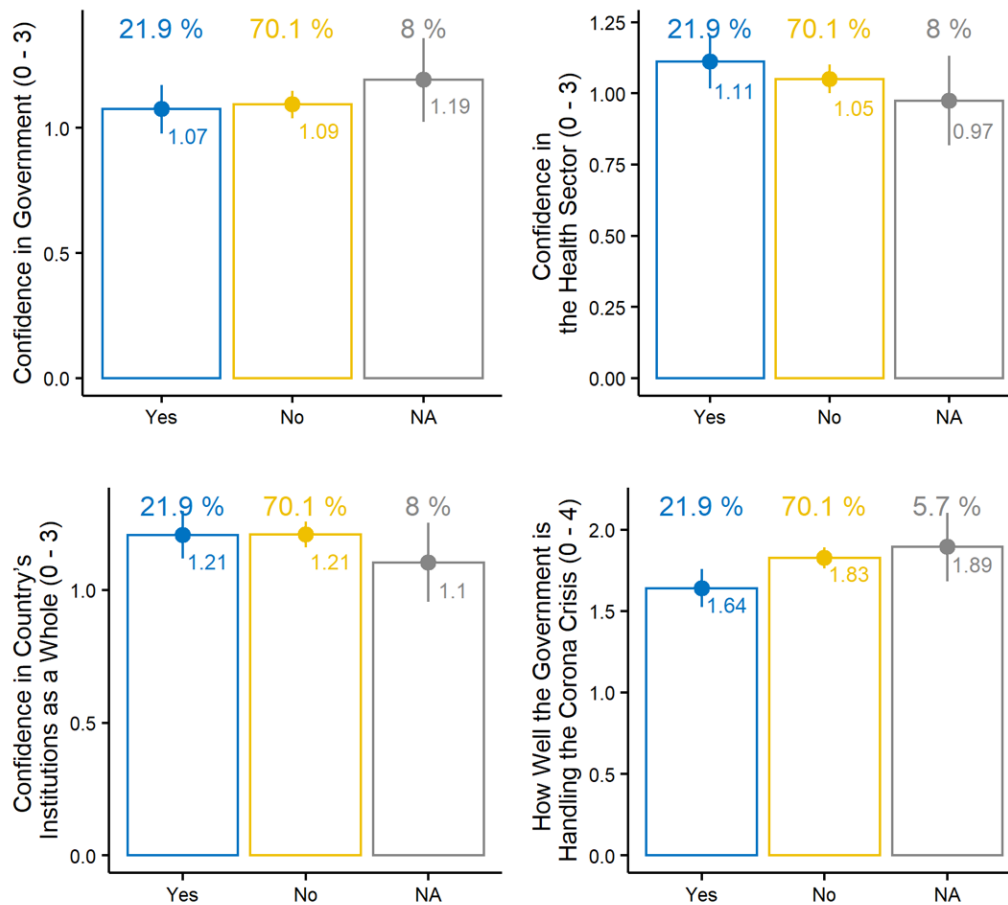
We constructed a binary variable that stands for any negative event in the labor market related to the pandemic—job loss, bankruptcy, a transition from full-time to part-time employment. The share of respondents reporting at least one such event in our sample is 21.9 percent, which is somewhat lower than the numbers provided by FOM. **Figure 2** shows mean values of our four political variables among respondents who experienced and did not experience the negative economic effects of the COVID-19 outbreak in Russia. Trust in government and political institutions, in general, does not differ across the groups, while trust in the healthcare system is (non-significantly, only by 0.06 points on a 0-3 scale) higher among those who suffered from the crisis. But satisfaction with the way the government has handled the pandemic turns out to be lower. In contrast to the three “confidence” variables, this difference is statistically significant, but the effect size is very small: 0.19 (1.64 vs. 1.83) on a 0-4 scale. The bottom line is that we observe neither any “rallying” effect that would temporarily boost political support nor any dramatic decrease in support due to economic grievances.

³ Pierson's rho = 0.18; polychoric correlation coefficient = 0.20.

It is, however, worth noticing that we may have caught a transitional situation when the adverse effects of the recession had not yet been observed. Such effects may loom larger after the summer break. Another possible explanation (not necessarily contradicting the first) is the extent to which the state manages to shift blame. State-sponsored media, as well as Kremlin spokesperson Dmitriy Peskov and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, have made a significant effort to [shift the blame](#) either on regional governors or irresponsible citizens who dared to travel abroad in the times of the pandemic or reckless barbecue-lovers who were allegedly spreading the disease in city parks during “the non-working days.” Later on, they claimed business was guilty for firing employees and [blamed](#) it for engaging in all kinds of “shady” activities instead of supporting the state.

One way or another, blame for the havoc was attributed even to loyal groups of the population. This scapegoating strategy has had some success: we found a modest positive association between the level of anxiety about one’s (or one’s relatives’) health and the propensity to blame fellow citizens for irresponsible and reckless behavior in the time of pandemic.⁴ Last but not least, public employees, including healthcare workers, were entitled to additional benefits. All families with children between 3 and 16 were made eligible to receive a one-time payment of 10,000 rubles per child. Although the amounts were fairly modest and often arrived with delays, they still might help somewhat to preserve the pre-outbreak level of political support and institutional trust.

⁴ Pierson’s rho = 0.19; polychoric correlation coefficient = 0.21.

Figure 2. Negative Economic Experience (X axis) and Political Support (Y axis)

Source: Online panel survey "Values in Crisis" by LCSR HSE.

COVID-Dissidents as a New Source of Political Protest?

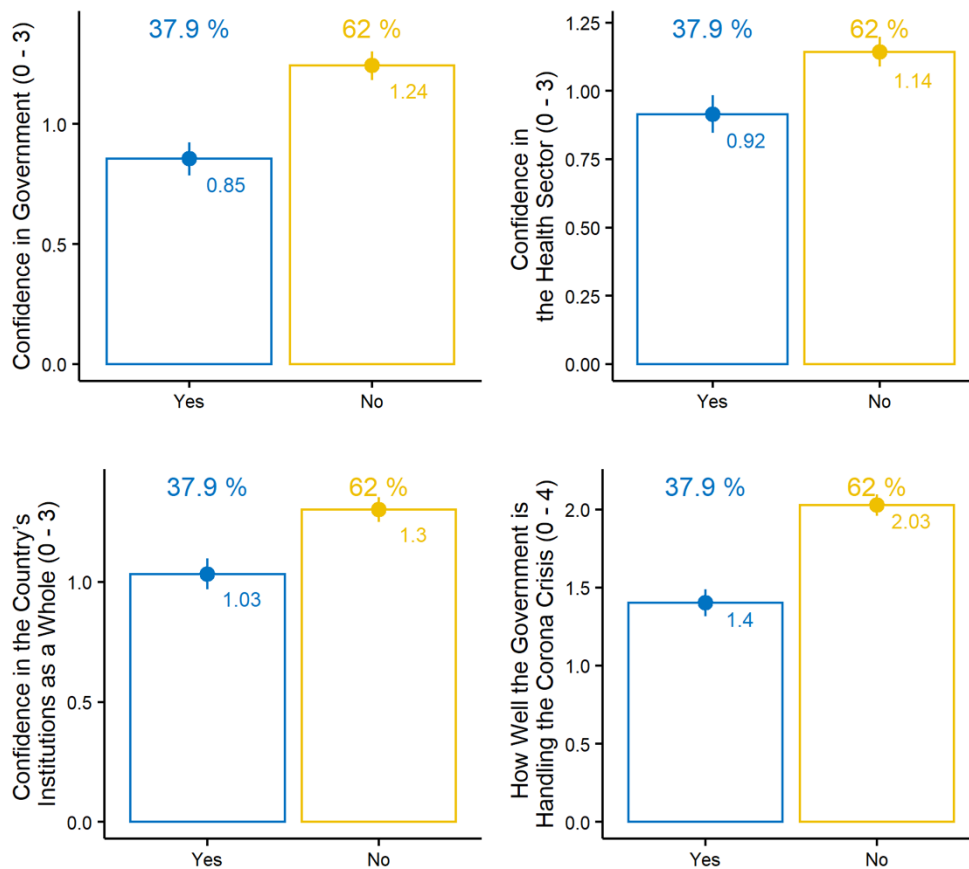
Against our expectations, the crucial factor that correlated with systematically lower trust in government, political institutions, and the healthcare system is neither negative economic experience nor fear of coronavirus, but the overall lack of trust in official information on the coronavirus. This does not seem to result from the low quality or unreliability of official statistics on the death toll, infected and recovered in Russia, but rather from the popularity of [conspiracy thinking](#).

In our online survey, we asked the following: "Social media are full of stories saying that the coronavirus pandemic is a hoax and that all of the lockdown measures are a hysterical overreaction. Do you believe these stories?" We found that those who believed constitute a whole 38 percent of the sample. It would not be an exaggeration to brand this group of respondents "COVID-dissidents." The mean value of the trust score for COVID-dissidents is only 0.85 points on a scale from 0 to 3 vis-à-vis 1.24 points for those

who believe that COVID-19 is a real threat. Both values are fairly low, but the difference is statistically significant. A very similar pattern is observed for trust in the healthcare system (0.92 vs. 1.14), political institutions as a whole (1.03 vs. 1.3), and satisfaction with the government’s policy against COVID-19 (1.4 vs. 2.03, but on a scale from 0 to 4) (see Figure 3).

These findings suggest that the sheer absence of institutional trust may be related to the spread of conspiracy theories, including ones that represent the coronavirus as a mystification. Conspiracy thinking is not unique to Russia or non-democratic states, but we might speculate that the limited access to reliable information and free media strengthen this tendency. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to look deeper into how mechanisms of blame attribution operate among COVID-dissidents; however, the latter should pave the way toward new research on how the pandemic potentially undermined political support among larger groups in the population.

Figure 3. COVID-19 as a Hoax (X axis) and Political Support (Y axis)



Source: Online panel survey “Values in Crisis” by LCSR HSE.

Conclusion

The preliminary results from our online survey “Values in Crisis” devoted to the societal consequences of COVID-19 in Russia coupled with the evidence from other Russian pollsters suggest that, first, direct encounters with the coronavirus do not lead to a significant decrease in political support and institutional trust in Russia, at least as of the time this study was conducted. At the same time, overall anxiety, irrespective of actual direct experience with COVID-19, weakly and positively correlates with political approval. It also may explain a relative success of the official blame avoidance strategy (blaming reckless citizens and business). Second, negative economic consequences of the coronavirus outbreak for the Russian population have not translated to political discontent either.

On the other hand, this crisis situation has not caused any kind of “rally ‘round the flag” effect yet. Third, more than one-third of Russians express a total lack of trust in any information concerning COVID-19 and fatigue from coronavirus-related news (as [seen](#) in FOM findings). This group of so-called “COVID-dissidents” constitutes the most prominent protest group standing out from among the rest of the respondents. It is likely that the popularity of conspiracy theories and belief in elites’ betrayal are by-products of the erosion of institutional trust. Limited media freedom, the Russian government’s isolationist policies over the last nine years, and inconsistent government actions during the pandemic only exacerbate further erosion of institutional trust, and among not only oppositionists but loyal constituencies too. And, broadly, pandemic-related distrust toward government and conspiracy theories have been trends in Europe.

What are the odds of these groups getting politicized? So far, there have been few examples of open political protest organized by conservative forces. The most prominent ones are the protests in Vladikavkaz against self-isolation measures and the infamous rebellion by a schema-hegumen (a clerical title in the Eastern Orthodox church) Sergii who took over a women’s monastery not far from Yekaterinburg (in the Ural region) with self-organized Cossacks’ troops and openly denied the existence of the coronavirus. While both instances, as of now, seem to be rather marginal events with no organized large-scale political mobilization, our data suggest that, if the pandemic and related restrictive measures continue for a relatively long time, the Russian government may face growing opposition among conservative groups.

This Time is Different (Again)

THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN RUSSIA

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No.

April 2021

Andrei Semenov¹

Perm State University

Russians have endured multiple crises in the post-Soviet period. “Shock therapy” in 1992, the August 1998 default, and the 2008-2009 global recession each had political consequences. Yet, the current economic downturn is different: it is structural, protracted, and unfolding against the backdrop of a global pandemic, which limits governmental instruments to handle the crisis. The simultaneous contraction of supply and demand in the economy coupled with oil price shocks in spring 2020 had multiple economic consequences for citizens: the decline in average disposable income accelerated and reached 8.2 percent in the second quarter of 2020, unemployment peaked at 6.3 percent in October (the eight-years maximum), and the annual inflation rate hit the 4.9 percent mark, above the Central Bank’s target of 4 percent. With an estimated GDP contraction of 3.6 percent and bleak projections of recovery, the state of the Russian economy does not look promising for the citizens.

Despite the apparent negative dynamics in the economy, Russians are hesitant to punish the public authorities politically and, overall, demonstrate loyalty to the regime. President Vladimir Putin’s approval rating plummeted to its record low of 59 percent in May 2020 (far below his long-term mean of 74 percent), only to rebound to 69 percent in September. The federal government’s net approval became positive after Dmitry Medvedev left the prime minister’s office in January 2020. The United Russia Party, which had ratings hovering slightly over 30 percent throughout 2020, managed to dominate regional elections. In other words, Russia’s political elites seemed to have weathered the political consequences of the crisis reasonably well, avoiding political responsibility. Or have they? In this memo, I examine the results of an original survey conducted in June 2020 to reveal the peculiarities of responsibility attribution for the crisis.

¹ [Andrei Semenov](#) is Senior Researcher at the Center for Comparative History and Politics at Perm State University.

The Economic Crisis and the Public

No government escapes the consequences of economic downturns. According to the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic has put enormous strain on states and societies worldwide, throwing the global economy into the deepest recession since World War II. For Russians, the pandemic exacerbated existing problems in the economy. In spring 2020, the country's structural dependence on hydrocarbon exports and the global oil trade collapse severely reduced revenues. Increased capital outflow and high volatility on global financial markets depreciated the ruble against international currencies. The ruble reached 76 per dollar in early December 2020 compared to 64 rubles-per-dollar one year earlier.

The government reacted to the crisis with a fiscal stimulus of about 4 percent of GDP channeled to selected households, firms, and social services. Priority was given to preserving public funds rather than engaging in the unconditional disbursement of money to citizens that many developed countries pursued. Experts [noted](#) that the total monetary aid to the economy was lower than in 2008-2009. Nevertheless, the combination of accumulated monetary reserves, the low share of private consumption in the economy, and anti-crisis policies helped the Russian economy avoid the worst outcomes. On the aggregate level, mass reaction to the crisis looked mild. The weekly Sberbank index of consumer spending [plummeted](#) by 33.5 percent in March 2020, only to fully recover by July. The second dive in October-November was not as steep, and by the end of 2020, Russians spent roughly on the same level as before the pandemic.

Public concerns about rising prices, unemployment, poverty, and corruption remained the most salient problems, according to regular Levada Center [polls](#). In August 2020, 61 percent of those surveyed put "inflation" at the top of their list (up 2 percent from the previous year), 44 percent put "unemployment" (up 8 percent), 39 percent put "poverty" (down 3 percent), and 38 percent put "corruption and bribery" (down 3 percent). The economic crisis as a category was a top concern for 26 percent (7th place). Unemployment, however, was the only category affected by the crisis; many lost jobs or faced employment problems. Although the real scale of the pandemic's impact on employment figures is hard to estimate, Levada [surveys](#) show that 17-25 percent of Russians experienced wage arrears between April-July 2020, 28-32 percent had salary cuts, and 26-29 percent suffered job losses.

On the political level, public reaction was even less tangible. The extent of public optimism as measured by the share of those who believe that the country is moving in the right direction dropped 11 percent from February to April 2020 (53 to 42 percent). By August, it had almost [recovered](#). Trust in political institutions remained intact. According to VTsIOM [polls](#), shares of domestic policies' positive and negative evaluations were almost identical at 30 percent, with a 37 percent peak of negative assessments in November 2020. Frustrations with economic and social policies overshadowed positive assessments, but the gap was never too wide. In short, no major

fluctuations in political opinions were detected after the economic and pandemic crises hit the country in March 2020. Other studies have detected some changes. For [example](#), Bryn Rosenfeld and her co-authors found “cracks in the popularity” of Putin, and some polls revealed growing frustrations and readiness to protest. Nevertheless, it is unclear if dissatisfaction among Russians is due to economic change or disillusionment with the government.

More importantly, Russians rarely took action against the restrictions put in place by the government. Calls on Internet forums and spontaneous movements such as the one in Vladkikavkaz in April 2020 achieved nothing. The share of those willing to participate in actions or protests to protect their rights and living standards [rose](#) from 24 percent in February to 29 percent in July, only to fall to 22 percent by November. Protest campaigns, such as in defense of ex-governor Sergei Furgal in Khabarovsk, or the mobilization to protect the Kushtau *shihan* (standalone chalk hill) in Bashkortostan, were not related to the economic crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic. It appears that despite deteriorating economic conditions, growing frustrations, and an uncertain future, Russians hesitated to contest the government. Perhaps a natural explanation is that they generally do not connect economic conditions with governmental performance.

Responsibility Attribution in Times of Crisis

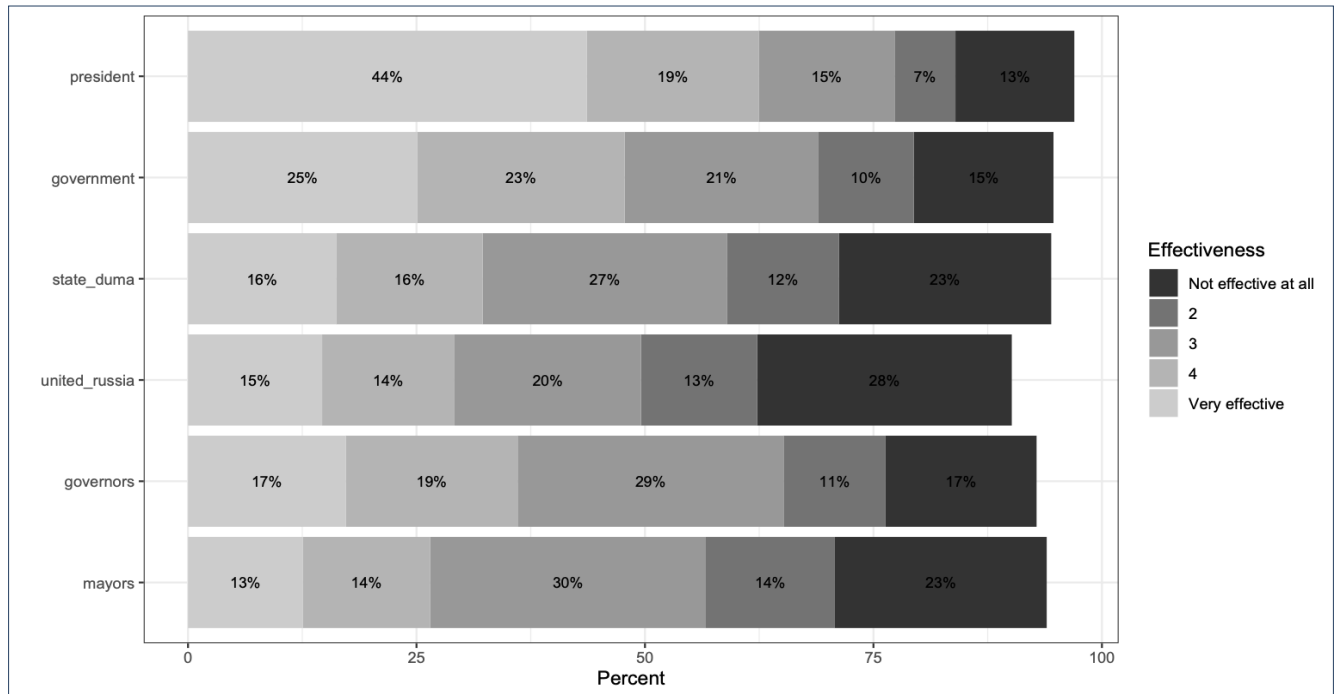
To assess if it is true that Russians fail to attribute responsibility for handling the crisis to public authorities, we commissioned the Levada Center to conduct a survey and two focus group discussions on the topic. The survey took place June 27-28, 2020, via phone surveys and employed standard stratified sampling and was designed to be representative of the nationwide population above 18 years old.

Amidst the pandemic, almost half of the respondents regarded the state of the economy as “average,” 37 percent responded with “bad” or “very bad,” and about 10 percent found the economy to be in “good” shape. For half of the sample, the crisis worsened their households’ economic conditions but did not undermine them. For one-third, the economic crisis did not have any effect at all, but for 15 percent, the impact was dramatic. There appears to be only a weak relationship between assessments of the state of the economy and evaluations of the crisis’s impact. Among those who stated that the crisis did not affect their economic situation, the majority felt optimistic. On the opposite, for those who felt severely affected by the crisis, a little over 60 percent had a “bad” or “very bad” impression of the economy. Those for whom the crisis had an impact but felt it was short of a disaster also tilted toward gloomy assessments. In short, the crisis affected a good share of Russians, but the plurality fared with its impact fairly well into June 2020.

How effective have the public authorities been in handling the economic crisis? Undoubtedly, the majority of Russians believe in the president: 44 percent found him “very effective” while only 20 percent leaned toward “not effective” (see **Figure 1**). The federal government trails the president, with 48 percent evaluating its performance

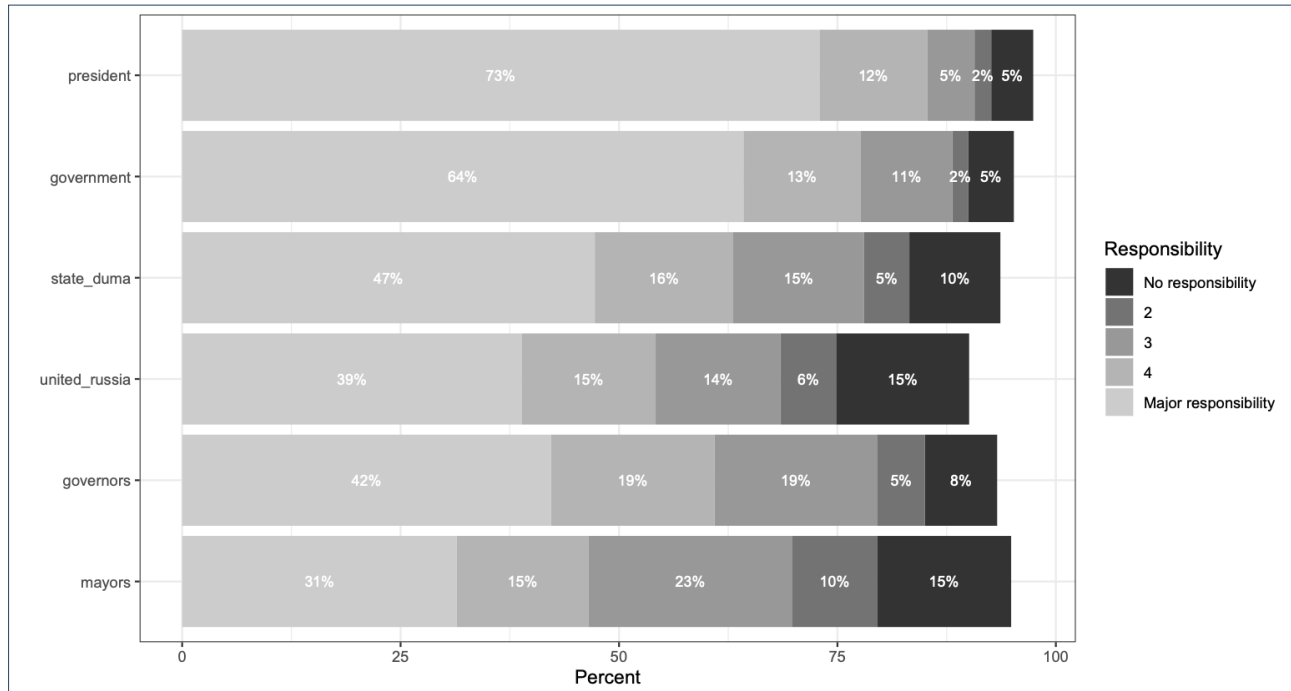
positively and 25 percent negatively. The ruling party, mayors, and national parliament receive the largest share of negative evaluations (41 percent, 38 percent, and 35 percent, respectively). Essentially, among executives, mayors are the least respected for their crisis management.

Figure 1. Authorities' Effectiveness in Handling the Economic Crisis



Source: Levada Center Survey, June 26-27, 2020, N = 1622. Percent of NAs not shown.

Similarly, the overwhelming majority attributes responsibility for handling the current crisis to Putin – only 5 percent believe that he is not responsible (see **Figure 2**). Moreover, 81 percent agreed that Putin bears personal responsibility for handling the crisis, against 17 percent who think the opposite. Mayors and United Russia are the least responsible. The parliament heads the governors by a 5 percent share for being responsible for handling the crisis. In short, most Russians find the president both responsible and effective in responding to the crisis and evaluate the federal government similarly. Russians treat subnational executives as less responsible but also less effective, while the legislative powers are responsible but not very effective.

Figure 2. Responsibility Attribution for Handling the Economic Crisis

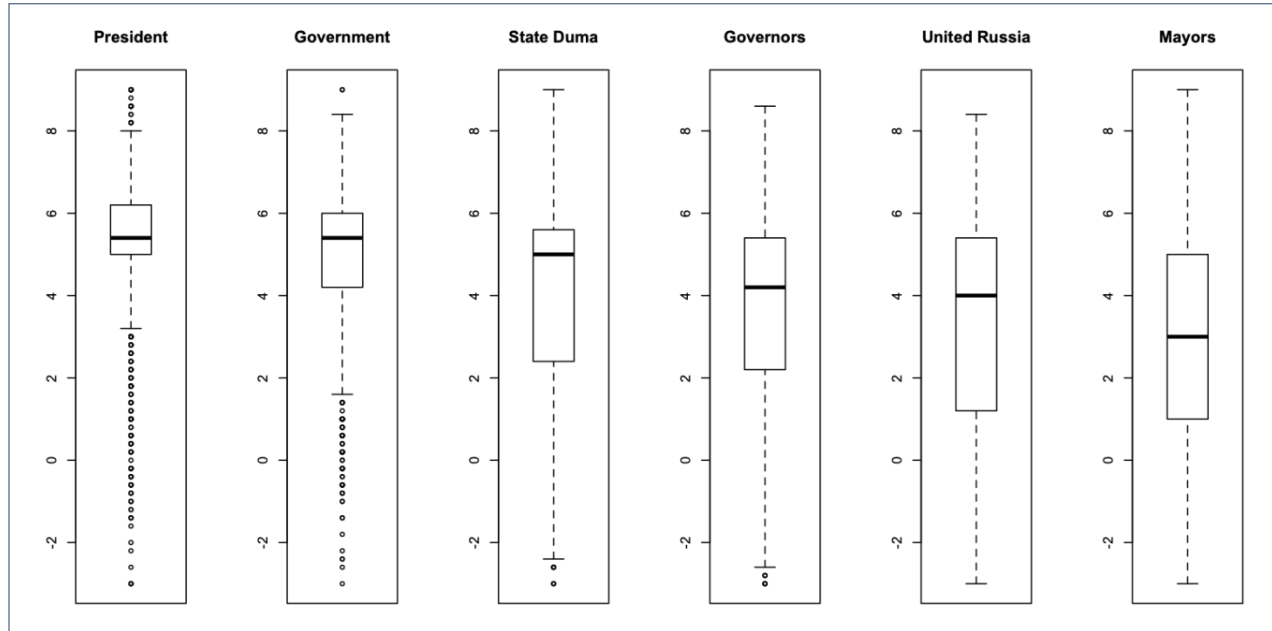
Source: Levada Center Survey, June 26-27, 2020, N = 1622. Percent of NAs not shown.

The scales in Figure 2 measure the intensity of the responsibility attribution, but they do not allow for comparing different political institutions. The respondents were asked to evaluate each public institution separately. Unless the survey does not explicitly direct them to rank the authorities, it does not allow us to judge who is more responsible. One way to mitigate this problem is to construct the Comparative Responsibility Index (CRI) [proposed](#) by Thomas Rudolph that measures the intensity of responsibility attribution of specific institutions relative to other authorities in the set. Higher positive values of CRI for the president, for example, indicate that the respondents hold this institution responsible and rank it above the other institutions. The shape of the distribution indicates how certain respondents are in their evaluations.

Figure 3 plots the CRI distributions for each institution in the questionnaire. The president and the federal government have similar evaluations with a median score of 5.4. The presidential index is more tight, meaning that the public is more certain about its role in handling the crisis. The State Duma comes third with a median value of 5 and much more uncertainty, the regional executives and the ruling party, United Russia, trail (median 4.2 and 4, respectively). Mayors ranked as the least responsible for handling the crisis. The public, however, remains quite uncertain how to evaluate United Russia and mayors: the interquartile range is 4.2 and 4 points, respectively, as compared to 1.2 for presidential CRI and 1.8 for the governmental index. In short, the CRI confirms that federal executives are distinct from other branches and levels of power: Russians see them as primary institutions meant to handle the consequences of an economic crisis.

The public is confused about United Russia's role even though the party holds the majority in the federal legislature and a vast majority in regional legislatures. Mayors might have been able to evade responsibility because their powers have deteriorated dramatically over the last two decades.

Figure 3. Comparative Responsibility Index Among Different Political Institutions



Source: Levada Center Survey, June 26-27, 2020, N = 1322.

The evidence from the survey defies the idea that Russians do not attribute the responsibility for handling the crisis to the top officials. On the contrary, the real centers of power—the president and the federal government—are almost universally seen as the drivers behind steering the economy away from crisis. Russians are more uncertain about the role of legislative and subnational authorities.

Responding to the Crisis with Political Means

Are Russians ready to defend their standards of living in times of crisis? **Table 1** presents the proportions of those who indicated that they would probably take action to defend their economic wellbeing and those who found such a repertoire effective. About a half (49 percent) ticked at least one item from the panel on actions that they would take, and even more (55 percent) found at least one action effective. Signing a petition and contacting the officials were the most frequent possible actions, the latter being most frequently assessed as effective. Voting for the opposition and attending authorized rallies came next. The risky repertoire (unauthorized rally) was willing to employ only 7 percent of respondents, while even fewer believe in its effectiveness.

Table 1. Willingness to Take Actions (to Defend Economic Rights) and Assessment of Actions' Effectiveness (Percent of the Total)

	WILLING TO TAKE ACTIONS	FIND ACTIONS EFFECTIVE
Contact officials	22	26
Write a petition	25	15
Attend an authorized rally	18	13
Vote for the opposition	20	19
Attend an unauthorized rally	7	5
Other	3	5
Do not know	5	5

Source: Levada Center Survey, June 26-27, 2020, N = 1622.

By these numbers, among those Russians ready to take some actions to protect their economic wellbeing, the plurality prefers a low-cost and less publicly visible repertoire. About one-fifth is ready to punish the authorities electorally; additionally, the same share found this tactic effective. Moreover, among those willing to take action, contacting officials and voting for the opposition were seen as effective: 62 percent in each category versus 52 percent for authorized rally-goers and 39 percent for petition-makers. Public rallies are perceived as less effective in general, and their unauthorized status drastically diminishes their attractiveness as a public protest tool.

The upshot is that, according to the survey, the public's response to economic hardship is heterogeneous. The majority preferred to do nothing—either because they did not see significant changes in the state of the economy or were satisfied with the president and the federal government's performance. The plurality, however, is in a darker mood with negative assessments of the economy and some readiness to act. The recent crackdown on public protests surrounding Alexey Navalny will likely reduce support for this type of action. Indeed, Levada Center polls show a drop of 6 percent between November 2020 and January 2021 of those ready to join collective actions with economic demands (from 23 percent to 17 percent). But the aggregate anticipation of protests jumped from 25 to 43 percent, fueled—as I argue [elsewhere](#)—partially by speeding inflation and rising unemployment, and partly by exposure to the mobilizations of late January.

Conclusion

Political consequences of complex processes such as the recent economic downturn are hard to grasp when they coincide with extraordinary events such as a pandemic and a volatile international environment. Moreover, short-term outcomes might be different from long-term consequences. So far, the Russian authorities have weathered well the

2020 storm, but Russian society is not tranquil. The rising costs for people to display certain types of political actions might nudge voters to switch to a less costly repertoire, such as voting for the opposition. Given the upcoming parliamentary elections, the stagnating ratings of the systemic parties, and the Kremlin's obsession with electoral management, tensions over electoral outcomes are likely to increase. Likewise, the economic crisis will not be resolved soon, further aggravating the public mood. It is not the first time the regime faces a combination of challenging factors. However, it is more than ever unclear whether the recipes that have worked so far will remain efficient.

Divide and Co-Opt:

GOVERNMENT OPPOSITION RELATIONS IN AZERBAIJAN IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

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Farid Guliyev¹

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Around the time of the February 2020 snap parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan, the government-opposition relationship took a surprising turn. In the run-up to the election, the ruling regime tolerated oppositional activity to a greater extent than it did in the past, in what some described as signs of the regime “softening.” However, with the rise in COVID-19 cases in mid-March in the country and the introduction of quarantine on March 24, the government changed tack. It escalated a crackdown in order to prevent potential social unrest. While not unusual for the regime, which has an appalling record of arbitrary arrests, this time, its tactics shifted slightly. Its rhetoric singled out and selectively targeted opposition leaders and activists with principled and uncompromising stances (i.e., the radical opposition).² It [labeled](#) them part of a foreign-sponsored “fifth column” – from youth activists to the leader of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) Ali Karimli and prominent opposition politician [Tofiq Yagublu](#).

Startlingly, the regime spared another opposition group, the still-unregistered political party REAL (“Republican Alternative Party”) led by former political prisoner Ilgar Mammadov. Unlike APFP, REAL’s stance is situational and seemingly relatively moderate. According to the February snap election results, REAL was the only oppositional force that was “allowed” to get even a single seat in the Milli Majlis, Azerbaijan’s national assembly. The rise of REAL in the political arena and its moderation toward the regime is interesting, and its plans and stakes in the game are puzzling, particularly knowing Baku’s political play-act of “divide and rule.”

¹ [Farid Guliyev](#) is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany.

² Applied here is Adam Przeworski’s game-theory framework according to which a political opposition is [divided](#) into moderates (those who seek to reform the regime from within) and radicals (those who want to overthrow authoritarian incumbents). Ellen Lust [draws](#) the line between loyalist vs. radical opposition elites.

Signaling a Softening? Get “Real”

In April, the country’s Supreme Court ruled to clear Mammadov of all criminal charges. This not only stands in sharp contrast to the regime’s complete intolerance of the “radical opposition,” but also opens the way for Mammadov to run in the next presidential election (2025). Rumors are circulating that an [early election](#) may be called in order to avoid overlapping with the parliamentary elections in 2025, as well as, possibly, to transfer power to First Lady/First Vice-President Mehriban Aliyeva, or some other elite-picked candidate. REAL was also the only (another surprise!) political party that agreed to participate in a so-called “political dialogue” with the opposition following the president’s call for “[inter-party dialogue](#)” in early March. The APFP and the (long-time) Müsavat political party refused to endorse the dialogue process, and in a late-March [speech](#), the president referred to them as “traitors” and “anti-Azerbaijani forces.”

The government’s efforts to [split](#) the opposition are, of course, nothing new. They follow a major government reshuffle that began last October in which an older generation of politicians (“hardliners”) with links to the éminence grise (such as former head of the presidential administration Ramiz Mehdiyev) was replaced with presumably more technocratic cadres promoted by the First Lady’s influential and ostensibly “reformist” Pashayev network.

The divide and rule tactic appears to pursue two goals. On the one hand, REAL’s co-optation aims to weaken (or perhaps wipe out) the challenge posed by the “radical opposition” and then to promote REAL as the only legitimate opposition group, thus allowing the regime to continue unabated. On the other hand, by incorporating REAL into the political system, the ruling elite imitates “liberal reforms” and “benign autocracy” that appeases critics and attracts Western investors and donors. For the political opposition, the co-optation of REAL would mean its further fragmentation, possible loss of public support, and the perpetuation of the perception that all politicians are corrupt and nobody can be trusted. The exclusion of the radical opposition as an alleged fifth column also probably alienates and possibly radicalizes non-systemic opponents.

Times have changed. In the face of Georgia and Armenia’s advances on the democratization front, Azerbaijan’s “rollback” has turned it into a sort of pariah state akin to Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s Belarus. The 2004-14 oil boom emboldened the regime to disregard Western criticism of its human rights record in international fora such as at the Council of Europe. The twin effects of low oil prices (first in 2014 and again this past spring) and the coronavirus pandemic have shaken the very foundations of the rentier-state economy, making the regime relatively more vulnerable to external pressures. In Azerbaijan, the weak rule of law, lack of checks and balances, and oligarchic control of the economy all increase foreign investment risks. A delay in signing a [new](#) partnership agreement with the EU, which has been under negotiation since February 2017, has impeded trade and economic linkages between Azerbaijan and EU member states.

If the regime is to avoid the Belarus scenario—voluntary or involuntary incorporation into the Russia-led security and economic orbit—or Turkmenistan’s type of self-isolation, the Aliyev regime has to open up. An exit from the West would be highly unpopular with Azerbaijani audiences, excluding only the most conservative Muslim circles. Russian dominance would be viewed as the return of Russian neo-colonialism. Therefore, the regime is pushed hard to make certain concessions to keep the West on the table, not least as a force to counterbalance Russia’s coercive diplomatic pressures. Westernization comes with strings attached, though, and the regime is cautious of the political risks of economic liberalization.

By imitating reforms, the regime is likely ticking the box in political conditionality that some Western partners are increasingly putting forward as a precondition for lending or support. For example, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which has acted as a major lender for the Azerbaijani government, has faced increased pressure from international human rights and accountability advocacy groups to ban lending to autocratic regimes with corruption and lack of accountability where loans have the potential to bolster a dictator’s power. Studies [show](#) that developing countries often adopt international norms of transparency, for instance, joining the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in order to gain reputational benefits in the international community of donors and lenders regardless of actual intent to reform. In March 2017, the EITI suspended Azerbaijan’s membership after the government refused to stop the arrest and harassment of independent civil society members.

While major international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) were [unwilling](#) to reconsider their lending policies, the EBRD said it would be ready to engage with critical voices. In a 2017 campaign, a coalition of 26 advocacy groups led by Human Rights Watch [called](#) on the EBRD “to refrain from public lending or lending benefiting the extractives industry, including for the Southern Gas Corridor.” The EBRD held a series of roundtables with civil society organizations in 2018-19 in order to address the growing concerns with the lack of transparency and shrinking civic space in Azerbaijan. The EBRD [pledged](#) to “consider selective sovereign lending activities after careful evaluation of related transition impact potential as well as undertaking rigorous due diligence processes.” While the extent to which this statement has impacted the bank’s further lending policies remains unclear, it is plausible to assume that certain preconditions would have to be met in order for Azerbaijan to receive loans.

Economic hardship wrought by falling oil prices in 2014 and 2020 has been discussed elsewhere (elite realignments [here](#) and corruption risks [here](#)); it is clear that dwindling oil revenues pushed the government to seek international lender and donor money. The State Oil Fund (SOFAZ), which contributes almost half of the state’s budget revenue, will [suffer](#) a significant loss of oil revenue owing to the low oil prices and Azerbaijan’s commitment to reducing output following the OPEC+ June 2020 agreement. The government will run a fiscal deficit, making it hard to finance multiple large-scale

infrastructure projects such as the completion of the Southern Gas Corridor. We are amid major [divestments](#) from Azerbaijan's energy projects while dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The leadership [presents](#) the infrastructure mega-projects as a part of its strategy to diversify the economy away from oil dependence.

February 2020 Parliamentary Elections

In the run-up to the February 9 snap election, there was relatively little interference with candidate registration. There was a surprising [flurry](#) of opposition activity, indicating a small potential for the country to evolve into a relatively competitive public space, given certain enabling conditions. Reportedly, about 1,374 candidates were running.

The opposition [camp](#) was roughly divided into three groups: traditional opposition parties, [new](#) opposition, and various independents and civic activists. In a nutshell, all opposition activity was centered on personalities rather than organizations. Civic associations and political parties are generally weak. A left-right ideological scale is largely irrelevant, as parties eschew competing on programmatic platforms or party manifestos. Ideological distinctions are hard to [establish](#) as virtually all parties appeal to the same set of ideas, namely nationalist (patriotic) sentiments and generic liberal democracy. With these caveats in mind, there is a small but vibrant community of youth activists of different ideological stripes who aspire to be in politics.

Müsavat and APFP are the oldest, traditional, and mainstream parties. They have been [marginalized](#) by government harassment, but they are still active. Arguably, APFP leader Karimli is the most recognizable opposition figure. In a rally that took place in the streets of downtown Baku last October, Karimli [marched](#) with protestors (but was stopped and beaten by the police). The APFP decided to boycott the snap election, refusing to grant it the veneer of legitimacy. Müsavat, with its relatively more moderate stance toward the regime, did participate. Its party leader, Arif Hajili, who took over from the charismatic Isa Gambar, announced a campaign under the slogan "Change your future with your voice." The campaign followed the traditional, unremarkable repertoire of contention.

These days, we see the old opposition being increasingly challenged by the relatively new opposition: the party REAL and other civic activists. REAL is perhaps the only organized party to emerge from the oil boom era of 2004-14. The Western-educated Mammadov, who was imprisoned for over five years until 2018, was not allowed to run for the parliament this year. According to Azerbaijani law, a person convicted of grave crimes—Mammadov was arrested on charges of organizing mass riots—is not allowed to run for office for six years. However, after the court removed all charges against him, REAL enthusiastically endorsed the call for snap elections and formed a [coalition](#) with other independent candidates. The REAL-led bloc appears to have been the only electoral coalition running on a programmatic [platform](#). Coalition members want to see Azerbaijan transform into a "real" as opposed to an "imitation" republic (with checks and balances, a stronger role for the parliament and municipalities, etc.). Furthermore,

politician Azer Gasimli broke with Mammadov and REAL and joined forces with “D18 Movement,” “N!DA,” and other independent initiatives and candidates (notably blogger Mehman Huseynov, lawyer Samad Rahimli, and youth activist Turgut Gambar), in an electoral alliance called “[Hereket](#)” (“Action”). Its campaigns are interesting for their creative use of [social media](#).

Finally, the rest of the camp of independent candidates is broad and diverse, comprising [youth](#) activists, young professionals, and bloggers. This group espouses a wide variety of ideas, values, and causes. Azerbaijan is a largely patriarchal society, and youth, especially from urban Baku, advocate for more personal freedoms, equal gender rights, and women’s empowerment (a Women’s March held by [feminists](#) in October 20, 2019, in Baku was unprecedented in this regard).

Crackdowns and Calls for Dialogue

The only REAL party member who managed to enter the new parliament was forty-eight-year-old Erkin Gadirli from the town of Ganja. Following the elections, REAL openly stated that they had been approached by the presidential administration for political dialogue. The president had [called](#) for a dialogue on March 10 in his speech at the opening of the new parliament. It is widely believed that Gadirli could not have secured a seat without tacit endorsement from the top.

Almost immediately after the government’s introduction of quarantine measures on March 24, a series of detentions and home isolations of opposition leaders followed, targeting specifically Karimli and those linked to the APFP. Karimli was ultimately put under house arrest and opposition leader and known critic Yagublu was detained. Others, such as youth activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, apparently received intimidating messages on social media and experienced hacker attacks.

The government move to initiate a political dialogue can be interpreted in several ways. According to one, the regime may have wanted to create a reform-looking image for Western donors. Surrounded by relatively democratic Georgia and Armenia, the Azerbaijani leadership may have grown slightly concerned about its image in the West for both symbolic and material reasons. In a second interpretation, by encouraging dialogue with REAL and loyalist opposition parties, the regime sought to [split](#) the opposition, which was already weakening through intra-opposition [bickering](#), and to validate REAL as the only appropriate and constructive form of opposition. This seems to have been clarified by the differential treatment of Mammadov and Rasul Jafarov, human rights defender and REAL board member, relative to other critics in the case of court acquittals. On April 23, the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan ruled to terminate all [charges](#) against Mammadov and Jafarov, following a judgment by the European Court of Human Rights.

Conclusion

Although the new parliament is dominated by regime loyalists, it is clear that a new generation of political groups and civic activists has emerged near the political arena. While it is small and lacks organization, it might be transformed into a force to be reckoned with.

In Adam Przeworski's view, a move toward political liberalization is more likely to occur when regime softliners/reformers align with moderate opposition. Within the ruling elite, reformers are confronted by hardliners (usually concentrated in the state security apparatuses) who believe that the regime should be preserved at all costs. However, it is not clear whether the recent reshuffle in Baku means the emergence of a genuinely reform-oriented team and the demise of the Mehdiyev-centered old guard. The promotion of (presumed) young technocrats does not imply that they are empowered to implement market reforms, which would certainly hurt the interests of the still-powerful hardliners.

Furthermore, the rise of REAL and its reasonableness toward the regime makes for a bewildering development. Did REAL self-consciously allow itself to be co-opted, or is it trying to implement its own agenda by making concessions to the regime? Perhaps the calculus behind such pragmatic self-cooptation is that no matter how bad it may look to outsiders, this is the only way to make changes from within the system. However, the challenge here is how to preserve one's integrity while dirtying one's hands in regime politics.

From a broader perspective, the opposition's division along personality rather than ideological lines makes it hard to defeat the regime. A form of [discursive closure](#) prevents the emergence of ideological competition and debate. In its early years, REAL looked like a fresh and more ideologically-oriented alternative to mainstream opposition parties in Azerbaijan. However, the co-optation and moderation of REAL make it easier for the regime to make very small concessions (one seat in parliament) by keeping the status quo essentially intact.



Institute for
European, Russian,
and Eurasian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
