

## Russia and the COVID-19 Crisis: Hardship at Home, Soft Power Flexing Abroad

by Nona Mikhelidze

On 25 March, one month after Russia registered its first confirmed case of Coronavirus, President Vladimir Putin announced a week of paid national holiday and invited Russians to stay home in a televised address to the nation.<sup>1</sup>

Further measures were subsequently introduced to limit the spread of the virus, while authorities prepared emergency plans to safeguard socio-economic conditions in the country. Initiatives included providing a new support package to businesses hit by the pandemic, a monthly bonus to medical personnel and the construction of new hospitals, following the Chinese model.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Russia's Presidency, *Address to the Nation*, 25 March 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63061>.

<sup>2</sup> Russia's Presidency, *Address to the Nation*, 2 April 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63133>.

Meanwhile, the constitutional referendum meant to extend Putin's term limit as president was postponed. Originally scheduled for 22 April, this delay is due to Putin's concern for public health and the multidimensional impact of the pandemic, a perfect storm involving quarantine measures, declining living standards, inflation and a weakened exchange rate, rising prices and increased job insecurity.

Taken together, these challenges could jeopardise the outcome of the referendum. A recent poll conducted by the Levada Center in March highlighted a very slim majority (45 per cent) in favour of Putin's constitutional amendments.<sup>3</sup>

During Putin's second address in early April, and as COVID-19 cases continued to grow, the president announced an extension of the nationwide "non-

<sup>3</sup> Levada Center, *Constitutional Amendments*, 19 March 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=22597>.

*Nona Mikhelidze is Head of the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Programme of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).*

working week” until the end of the month. By 17 April, Russia had reported 32,008 cases of COVID-19 and 273 deaths.<sup>4</sup>

A look at the official statistics raises some suspicion, however. Confirmed contagion numbers remain low in comparison to European states and about 59 per cent of Russians’ do not believe the official tally.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as admitted by Moscow’s Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, testing volumes remain low and no one knows the real extent of the contagion.<sup>6</sup>

More realistic estimates can only come if Russia increases testing procedures. As of 17 April, Russia conducted around 1,718,019 COVID-19 tests out of an estimated 146 million population.<sup>7</sup> Until recently, local authorities in Moscow sent test samples to the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, more than four hour’s flight from the capital. But how many tests can one lab handle?

Moreover, a report by PCR.News – a media outlet for medics and healthcare professionals – noted how the Novosibirsk laboratory’s testing system had a lower sensitivity than other centres, raising doubts about

false negatives.<sup>8</sup> In response, Moscow’s Mayor announced the construction of new laboratories to improve efficiency. In addition to the perplexity about confirmed cases, there are doubts on casualty statistics as well, as those suffering from previous health conditions have not been included in official COVID-19 death count.<sup>9</sup>

Citizens are now wondering how the country’s healthcare system will cope. Like many European countries, Russia faces a shortage in protective masks and equipment. “We wash our masks, dry them, wipe them down with towels and then use them again”, a nurse from the tuberculosis hospital in the Urals city of Kurgan told the *Moscow Times*.<sup>10</sup> Yet, compared to European counterparts, Russia’s healthcare system is significantly underdeveloped.

According to a 2019 Russian public audit, more than 40 per cent of healthcare facilities (out of 116,865 buildings inspected) have no central heating, over half do not have hot water and almost a third lack a central water supply. Plenty of rural settlements are completely devoid of healthcare.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Worldometer, *COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*, last updated: 17 April 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.

<sup>5</sup> Levada Center, *The Coronavirus Situation in Russia*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=22797>.

<sup>6</sup> Russia’s Presidency, *Meeting on Measures to Fight Coronavirus Spread in Russia*, 24 March 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63053>.

<sup>7</sup> Worldometer, *COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*, cit.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Ilyushina, “Why Does Russia, Population of 146 Million, Have Fewer Coronavirus Cases Than Luxembourg?”, in *CNN*, 23 March 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/21/europe/putin-coronavirus-russia-intl>.

<sup>9</sup> Demian von Osten and Oksana Orłowa, “Wie zuverlässig sind Moskaus Zahlen?”, in *Tagesschau*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/wdr/rusland-corona-zahlen-101.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Jake Cordell and Evan Gershkovich, “We Don’t Have Enough Intensive Care Beds: Coronavirus Will Test Russia’s Creaking Healthcare System”, in *The Moscow Times*, 19 March 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/19/a69675>.

<sup>11</sup> Russia’s Chamber of Accounts,

Years of widespread corruption has prevented the building of appropriate infrastructure and state facilities as all procurement and public contracts involve bribes and kickbacks.<sup>12</sup>

Russia has been conducting a reform of its healthcare system. This has primarily focused on aspects such as demographic decline, maternity care and health insurance, however. Medical facilities and services, meanwhile, have not been systematically reviewed since the end of the 1950s,<sup>13</sup> according to Minister of Health Veronika Skvortsova.

Finance Minister Anton Siluanov also admitted that clinics and district hospitals are “in poor, if not terrible condition”.<sup>14</sup> Over the years, the number of hospitals in Russia halved and the number of clinics decreased by 12.7 per cent under the guise of optimisation. Specialists warned that if this rate was to be maintained, by 2021–22 the number of medical facilities in the country would return to levels last seen during the Russian Empire in 1913.<sup>15</sup>

With these figures in mind, it is clear that the Russian healthcare system faces daunting challenges. But it does

not end here. The oil price has hit a new low of 20 US dollars a barrel, the lowest in 18 years,<sup>16</sup> Russian crude oil is trading at 10 US dollars per barrel and the Russian rouble has lost a third of its value.<sup>17</sup> If oil prices continue to stay below 40 US dollars, Moscow will inevitably face a budget deficit this year, notwithstanding Russia’s lower breakeven oil price (40 US dollars a barrel) compared to Saudi Arabia (80 US dollars).<sup>18</sup> Stakes could not be higher for the Kremlin.

Millions of Russians are already facing growing poverty and unemployment without any indication what their life may look like after COVID-19. Setting aside the limitations of the healthcare system and the risk of not receiving necessary and timely medical care, losing a source of income is what scares people the most.

Notwithstanding these mounting difficulties at home, the Kremlin has not forgotten the international domain. Moscow has lost no time in seeking to flex its soft power muscles, sending “humanitarian aid” to a number of Western countries, beginning with Italy.<sup>19</sup> Instead of much

“Здравоохранение” (Salute), in *Bulletin of the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation*, No. 2 (267) 2020, <http://audit.gov.ru/upload/iblock/84e/84ed13237c0fe2b0dae052063e371cfe.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> E.A. Mantzaris and Z. Ndevu, “Corruption, Healthcare and Society: A study of Brazil and Russia”, in *African Journal of Public Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 8 (September 2017), p. 78-90, <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-ab54b6625>.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Aris, “Is Russia’s Healthcare System Up to Dealing with the Coronavirus?”, in *IntelliNews*, 26 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ala12N>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Reid Standish, “In the Coronavirus Putin May Have Met His Match”, in *Foreign Policy*, 30 March 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/30/coronavirus-putin-met-his-match-covid>.

<sup>17</sup> “Russia’s Economy Is Isolated from the Global Rout”, in *The Economist*, 26 March 2020, <https://econ.st/2wuI5vS>.

<sup>18</sup> Davide Barbuscia and Darya Korsunskaya, “Russia vs Saudi: How Much Pain Can They Take in Oil Price War?”, in *Reuters*, 9 March 2020, <https://reut.rs/38HdkAU>.

<sup>19</sup> “Coronavirus in Russia: The Latest News”, in *The Moscow Times*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/17/a69117>.

needed anaesthetists, respirators and ventilators, what Italy got was a military contingent used to disinfect chemical contamination in warzones.

Moreover, the Russian team deployed to northern Italy included two “journalists” of the Zvezda TV channel belonging to the Russian Ministry of Defence. These were actively involved in Russia’s Syria military campaign and one was in the past deported from Estonia because of his propaganda activities.<sup>20</sup>

Why would Russia send military aid instead of civilian doctors? Russia’s use of the military has underlying motives, possibly including intelligence gathering and influence operations.

A culminating moment in Russia’s “humanitarian” campaign in Italy was a message posted on Facebook by the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Defence containing threats - “Qui fodit foveam, incidet in eam: he who digs a pit, will fall into it”<sup>21</sup> – against Italian journalist Jacopo Iacoboni, who is investigating Russian medical aid for Italy’s Lombardy region.

Meanwhile, back home, Russian officials and media are actively dismissing the epidemic in Russia,

<sup>20</sup> Institute for Global Threats and Democracies Studies (IGTDS), “La Stampa Findings on Intelligence-Gathering Nature of Russian Mission in Italy Confirmed”, in *IGTDS Estimates*, 8 April 2020, <https://igtlds.org/?p=2421>.

<sup>21</sup> Russia’s Ministry of Defence, “Dichiarazione del portavoce del Ministero della Difesa maggiore generale Igor Konashenkov” (Statement of Major General Igor Konashenkov, spokesperson of the Ministry of Defence), *Facebook post*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/mod.mil.rus/posts/2608714436037963>.

while publicising the shortcomings of European governments and highlighting Moscow’s “assistance” to states like Italy.

The death of Western liberalism and with it the future of the European Union are never far from the surface in this kind of propaganda narratives, as is the supposed strength and attractiveness of the Russian model of governance compared to that of struggling European democracies.

COVID-19 is also perceived as an opportunity for the regime to reinforce its control of the population. Local authorities in Moscow have recently installed 170,000 facial recognition cameras<sup>22</sup> which in the future could be used as a tool of repression. A new mobile phone QR code that effectively limits movement and allows the government to track individuals has also been launched.<sup>23</sup>

It remains to be seen how Russia’s health system will cope with the pandemic. Russia, like many others, will need to test hundreds of thousands of citizens, purchase significant quantities of hospital ventilators and other protective equipment and build or renovate specialised hospitals. For all of the above, Russia will need money, which is in short supply.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Ilyushina, “How Russia Is Using Authoritarian Tech to Curb Coronavirus”, in *CNN*, 29 March 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/29/europe/russia-coronavirus-authoritarian-tech-intl>.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Ilyushina, “Moscow Rolls Out Digital Tracking to Enforce Lockdown. Critics Dub It a ‘Cyber Gulag’”, in *CNN*, 14 April 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/14/world/moscow-cyber-tracking-qr-code-intl>.

Yet, for some in the Kremlin, it does not seem to matter. It does not even seem to matter that oil prices have reached a new historic low and that under these conditions Russia's economy risks sliding towards the brink of collapse.

Instead, the task of paramount importance for a country where "poverty has become a disgrace"<sup>24</sup> is to "help" Western democracies with aid and assistance, promoting the slogan "from Russia with love". This is done by sending medical/military aid to Italy, ignoring the suffering back home in Russia, while shouting from the rooftops: "This is your European solidarity, you all left Italians while we are here to help."<sup>25</sup>

17 April 2020

<sup>24</sup> Martin Brand, "Fighting Poverty in Russia", in *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 249 (20 March 2020), p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000404196>.

<sup>25</sup> Vitali Shklyarov, "Что мы делаем в Италии? Политический троллинг Путина времен коронавируса" (What Are We Doing in Italy? Putin's Political Trolling of Corona Times), in *Echo of Moscow Blog*, 27 March 2020, [https://echo.msk.ru/blog/shklyarov\\_v/2613895-echo](https://echo.msk.ru/blog/shklyarov_v/2613895-echo).

## Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì ([a.dessi@iai.it](mailto:a.dessi@iai.it))

- 20 | 25 Nona Mikhelidze, *Russia and the COVID-19 Crisis: Hardship at Home, Soft Power Flexing Abroad*
- 20 | 24 Luca Barana, *A Tale of Two Unions: Africa, Europe and a Pragmatic Investment in Multilateralism in Times of COVID-19*
- 20 | 23 Tommaso Emiliani, *Between God and the Sugar Dates: Lessons for a "Geopolitical" EU from the US–Iran Crisis*
- 20 | 22 Elena A. Korosteleva and Irina Petrova, *Resilience Is Dead. Long Live Resilience?*
- 20 | 21 Stefano Manservigi, *COVID-19: A Stress Test for International Development Cooperation*
- 20 | 20 Daniele Fattibene, *Time for a European Climate and Sustainable Development Bank*
- 20 | 19 Alessandro Marrone, *The COVID-19 Pandemic and European Security: Between Damages and Crises*
- 20 | 18 Giuliano Garavini, *This Time is Different. The "COVID-Shock" and Future of the Global Oil Market*
- 20 | 17 Nicola Bilotta and Alissa Siara, *From Strategic Autonomy to the Internationalization of the Euro: Europe's Challenges and the Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis*
- 20 | 16 Elisa Murgese, *Illegal Trafficking of Plastic Waste: The Italy–Malaysia Connection*