

Pandemic brings Putin down to size



Watching Putin mark Victory Day, from a Dacha near Moscow. Photo: Dimitar Dilkov/AFP via Getty

Russia's surging coronavirus epidemic is now the world's second-largest, behind the United States.

What to watch: As Russia becomes a new epicenter, President Vladimir Putin appears almost paralyzed.

How it happened: Russia's caseload had remained surprisingly low until mid-April, when it started rising sharply. Daily new cases have now been around or above 10,000 for the past 12 days.

- Russia's mortality rate remains low (2,305 deaths from 252,000 cases) but the deaths of many COVID-positive patients are being attributed to pneumonia or other causes.
- That's in line with how Russia has long treated deaths from diseases like AIDS, noted Yale University's Dr. Robert Heimer in a Wilson

Center webcast.

Many of the deceased were health care providers. Severe shortages of protective equipment and delayed or ill-conceived policies have allowed hospitals to become hotspots.

- Doctors have reportedly been forced to work even if they are in vulnerable groups or have already become ill. Meanwhile, “half-trained medical students... felt like raw military conscripts being sent into battle, barely trained to shoot,” per the Washington Post.
- At least three health care workers have fallen from windows in possible suicide attempts.

The disease has reached Putin’s inner circle, with his longtime spokesman and close adviser Dmitry Peskov hospitalized this week. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and several officials have tested positive.

- Putin has been conducting meetings via video conference, often appearing a bit bored. “Geopolitical games are interesting for him; lockdown is boring,” political analyst Tatiana Stanovaya told the Moscow Times.
- Putin brought Russia’s ill-defined national “non-working” period to an equally vague end on Monday.
- Moscow, which has roughly half of all cases, will remain locked down.

What they’re saying: “Only good news comes from Putin. He only allows, encourages, promises,” says Sergey Parkhomenko, a Russian political commentator. The decisions on closures, restrictions, and fines are left to local officials.

- The devolution of authority during this crisis has been highly unusual, Parkhomenko says. Local officials that have little connection with the population have been handed responsibility but not resources, he adds.
- Russian businesses have been instructed to continue paying their workers, but have received negligible state assistance. Moscow may be particularly reluctant to spend at a time of rock bottom oil prices.

What’s next: The more passive Putin is not particularly popular. His approval rating has fallen to a historically low, if still enviable, 59%, according to the Levada Center.

- The timing is unfortunate for Putin, who was forced to delay a constitutional referendum last month that could allow him to hold power through 2036.
- The Kremlin reportedly wants to hold it as soon as June 24, perhaps to preempt what could be a brutal recession.
- “Before the epidemic, it was always absolutely guaranteed for him,” Parkhomenko says. “Now, it’s a big risk.”

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