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MUDDLING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC: MAKING SENSE OF RUSSIA’S CONFUSING RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Abstract:

This paper examines the Russian government response to Covid-19, which proved to be ineffective at keeping the virus under control and mitigating the negative socioeconomic effects of the pandemic. It argues that the causes of the Russian government’s suboptimal response to Covid-19 can be attributed to two main factors. First, the authoritarian and overly centralized structure of Russia’s political institutions, which prioritized political and economic considerations over public safety and inhibited genuine regional initiative, undermined the government’s ability to contain the pandemic. The regional heads often lacked the skills, financial resources and authority to implement the necessary policies and containment measures, resulting in disastrous developments in several Russian regions. Second, the Soviet legacies associated with a culture of non-disclosure and the inconsistent public health messaging during the pandemic, combined with limited social relief and economic support measures, contributed to the public mistrust in state institutions, indicating fraught relations between citizens and the state. This was reflected in public protests and popular resistance to government orders, including the widespread defiance of lockdown instructions, a refusal to wear masks in public places and low vaccination rates. Looking ahead, the long-term consequences of the current public health crisis could be deeply political, contributing to a further schism between the rulers and the ruled.

Keywords: Russia, Covid-19, pandemic, governance, vaccination, Sputnik V

INTRODUCTION

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic posed tremendous challenges for governments around the world. In responding to these challenges, most countries followed the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) and implemented lockdowns and other preventive public health measures. In

addition, many governments launched a series of economic and social relief programs and reconsidered their approach to protecting civil liberties amidst the chaos of a public health emergency. However, the effectiveness of these measures differed dramatically across the world. Whereas the governments of China, Singapore and South Korea demonstrated high levels of state capacity at containing the spread of the disease and mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic on their economies, other countries, including most post-Soviet states, struggled with managing the public health crisis and the economy (Chen et al., 2021; Shastry, 2021).

The Russian case represents a particularly peculiar example of public health crisis management in which swift government action was followed by fragmented and decentralized attempts of regional authorities to contain the virus; however, the effectiveness of these initiatives proved to be short-lived, inconsistent and often contradictory, raising concerns about low state capacity and regime legitimacy. The government's initial response to the spread of Covid-19 started with the creation of a working group under the State Council of the Russian Federation on the prevention of pandemic spread on March 15, 2020. This was followed by air and land border closures and the introduction of strict lockdowns in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other regions across the country. However, in April 2020 the government had distanced itself from the responsibility to contain the pandemic, leaving it up to the regional authorities to decide on lockdowns, school closures and other public health precautions and to implement federal support measures. As a result, by the time the second wave of the pandemic hit Russia in the fall of 2020, the situation had turned for the worse, with some of Russia's leading experts arguing that the number of official cases was underreported, and that Russia's figures were most likely not far behind the U.S. numbers (Sewell, 2020). Struggling to keep the virus under control, the government and regional authorities faced regular criticism for their poor crisis management capabilities, contradictory rules, inconsistent lockdowns and lack of a long-term strategy for dealing with the pandemic. Even the launch of a mass vaccination campaign with Sputnik V in December 2020 did not help slow the spread of the disease, with the Russian public and international scientific community expressing doubts about the effectiveness and safety of the Sputnik vaccine. Consequently, the situation continued to deteriorate, and by late September 2021 the authorities reported record numbers of new cases and deaths from coronavirus as well as low vaccination rates, with only 32 percent of the country's population of 146 million partially vaccinated and 28 percent fully vaccinated (Aljazeera, 28 September 2021).

In trying to uncover the causes of such apparent government inefficiency at managing a public health emergency, this paper will argue that the nature of Russia's hybrid regime and overly centralized federal structure, which prioritized political considerations and concerns about regime legitimacy over public safety and discouraged genuine regional initiative, undermined the government's ability to contain the pandemic. Being politically and financially dependent on the central government, the regional authorities found the responsibility for containing the pandemic beyond their capacity to handle, leading to disastrous consequences in several Russian cities and regions, including St. Petersburg, Dagestan and Kuzbass. In addition, the Soviet legacies of a culture of non-disclosure and inconsistent public health messaging contributed to public mistrust in state institutions and the vaccine, indicating fraught relations between citizens and the state. Looking ahead, the situation does not appear as if it will be resolved any time soon. The political inertia of the current regime makes it difficult to implement any decisive changes in the management of the pandemic, whereas the broken state-society relations further reinforce the scepticism and vaccine hesitancy among Russian citizens. As a result, the long-term consequences of the current public health crisis could be deeply political, contributing to a further schism between the rulers and the ruled.

This article contributes to a growing body of literature on state responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in post-Soviet states. The article proceeds as follows. The next section places the Russian case within the comparative theoretical literature on governance and government effectiveness in hybrid regimes, paying particular attention to the nature of Russia's political system, its legitimacy and its institutions. The analytical section discusses the Russian government's response to the pandemic and examines the factors responsible for the poor government performance in tackling the public health emergency. The final section revisits the main argument presented in this article.

Governance and Government Effectiveness in Hybrid Regimes

Following Vladimir Putin's rise to power at the turn of the century, Russia has transformed from a weak democracy to a type of hybrid regime best described as a competitive authoritarian system (Levitsky and Way, 2002). Competitive authoritarian regimes, while paying lip service to the values of democracy, exert control over society and the state institutions through elections that are regular and nominally competitive but display substantial irregularities as well as serious flaws in political culture, government performance and political participation (Levitsky and Way, 2002). Schedler defines such regimes as electoral authoritarian, stating that elections in

such regimes are "broadly inclusive (they are held under universal suffrage), minimally pluralistic (opposition parties are permitted to run), minimally competitive (parties and candidates outside the ruling coalition, while denied victory, are allowed to win votes and seats), [and] minimally open (dissidence is not subject to massive, but often to selective and intermittent repression)" (quoted in Ross, 2018). He is also careful to emphasize that elections in electoral authoritarian regimes are not even minimally democratic, as "governments subject them to manifold forms of authoritarian manipulation that violate the liberal-democratic principles of freedom, fairness, and integrity" (quoted in Ross, 2018).

In the case of Russia, following Putin's rise to power, the weak and defective electoral democracy of Yeltsin's era has gradually been replaced with a more authoritarian version characterized by a top-down vertical of power in which the state apparatus, regional elites and economic actors are all hierarchically subordinated to central authority (Hale, 2010). To ensure the regime's survival, the Putin administration has relied extensively on three institutional mechanisms: superpresidentialism, subnational authoritarianism and a dominant party (Gel'man, 2014). Russia's superpresidentialism is rooted in the 1993 Constitution and is characterized by an extraordinarily strong presidency with formal powers to legislate by decree and to determine the composition of the government (Fish, 1997). With Yeltsin's departure, this system became the platform for the further authoritarisation of Russia's fragile institutions. As time passed, the system transformed into one large nationwide top-down political machine having co-opted or pressured the regional elites into submission and using United Russia as the power mechanism to dominate national and regional elections (Gel'man, 2014). In addition, the Putin administration strengthened the fiscal administrative capacities of the federal centre so that federal transfers started playing a much more significant role in shaping regional outcomes (Starodubtsev, 2018). While it did help to somewhat reduce regional disparities across Russia, the growing dependence on federal transfers also made regional elites vulnerable to the whims of federal authorities, as it offered the federal government an opportunity to accuse regional officials of violating the rules on spending federal funds (Di Bella et al., 2017; Dynnikova, et al., 2021). In short, after two decades of fiscal and political centralization, Russia emerged as a de facto centralized authoritarian state in which regional elites were politically and financially dependent on the central government, serving as obedient executioners of federal policy goals.

The reformatting of the Russian political system and institutions continued in

January 2020 following an announcement by President Putin of major constitutional changes. Approved by parliament and signed by the president in March 2020, the changes entered into force on 4 July after a national referendum in which nearly 78 percent of those who voted supported the proposed amendments. They asserted that the Russian constitution should take precedence over decisions reached by international institutions. Finally, they opened the possibility for Putin to remain in office following the expiry of his current presidential term in 2024 and provided him with security should he decide to leave office (Teague, 2020).

And yet, the streamlining of the country's political institutions into what seemed to be a smoothly operating vertical of power did not result in significant improvements in governance. In this paper, governance is defined as "the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented)" in a country (UNESCAP, 2009). Good governance implies that the state is effective in the delivery of its services and the implementation of its policies, plans, programs, and projects. It also suggests it has an effective mechanism for monitoring and evaluating its performance and uses the collected information to produce further improvements and corrective actions. Countries with high levels of governance effectiveness demonstrate greater accountability, transparency in the decision-making process, public participation and the rule of law.

In the case of Russia, although some governance success stories have been reported in a number of policy fields, the general view is that poor governance continues to plague the Russian state at both federal and subnational levels, manifesting itself in weak rule of law, corruption and rent-seeking as well as poor-quality state policies and administration. At the regional level, governors demonstrate a lack of political will and a reluctance to take the initiative and risk their positions, thereby creating a vicious cycle of policy inertia and suboptimal performance in the country's governance system. According to Gel'man and Zavadskaya (2020), several factors help explain Russia's poor governance problem, including the phenomenon of the "over-regulated state", the prioritization of political considerations over economic performance, and few positive incentives to stimulate local initiatives and good governance practices. Indeed, in the context of weak rule of law and low levels of public accountability, over-regulation and a reliance on rigid performance indicators seem to be the legitimate substitutes for other non-existent mechanisms of accountability. This, however, creates an environment in which regional elites and the bureaucracy are not focused on fulfilling their governing and administrative tasks but are more

interested in formally meeting the set performance indicators (Paneyakh, 2014). In addition, the prospects for effective governance are further undermined due to the electoral nature of Russia's authoritarian institutions, in which the political survival of regional elites and bureaucracy is heavily dependent on election results rather than on regional socio-economic indicators (Gel'man and Zavadskaya, 2020).

In summary, two decades of political and fiscal centralization have transformed the country's political institutions into a top-down vertical of power. However, despite the seeming consolidation of Russia's authoritarian institutions and practices, the government still struggles with issues of corruption and poor governance. In addition, the presence of regular elections makes the Kremlin vulnerable to mass protests and possible destabilizing developments, especially if public opinion turns against them. These challenges became particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, which left the Russian authorities to ponder over a virus containment strategy that would control the spread of disease while also posing no risk to the stability and legitimacy of the current political system. As the next section will demonstrate, although the current containment strategy proved to be partially successful at shielding the federal authorities from criticism over their handling of the public health emergency, it failed to effectively contain the virus and in fact may have contributed to growing social tensions and persistent vaccination hesitancy among Russian citizens.

The Covid-19 Challenge: Assessing the Russian Government Containment Strategy

The Russian government's response to Covid-19 included a series of individual and community-based measures to slow the spread of the virus and the implementation of targeted social assistance and economic measures to support affected population groups and businesses.

The government recognized the risks associated with the virus outbreak as early as late January 2020, as the Russian National Covid-19 Response Team was created on 29 January 2020 and the government announced the suspension of air traffic with the Chinese city of Wuhan on January 31. As the first positive cases were reported in Tyumen and Chita in late January and then in Moscow in early March, the authorities went ahead with the introduction of individual quarantine measures, ordering all Russians returning from coronavirus epicenters to self-isolate (Latypova, 2020). From then, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases increased rapidly in large metropolitan areas of Moscow and St. Petersburg, forcing the government to ban the entry of most foreign nationals from March 18, followed by the closure of all border

crossings from March 30 (Latypova, 2020).

In all other aspects of crisis management, the federal government took a hands-off approach and passed the responsibility to regional leaders, trusting them to make sensitive decisions over whether to declare quarantine rules and how. Speaking to the nation on 25 March 2020, President Putin declared a week-long paid national holiday from March 28 but did not enforce a strict lockdown, leaving it to regional leaders to decide on the measures used to slow the spread of the disease. This was further confirmed in the Decree "On measures to ensure the sanitary and epidemiological well-being of the population in the Russian Federation in connection with the spread of the new coronavirus infection (Covid-19)" signed by President Putin on 2 April 2020 (Ukaz o merakh po obespecheniiu, 2 April 2021). On the surface, this decision looked like a sudden break from the established pattern of top-down federal relations that had characterized Putin's Russia in the past two decades; however, given the diversity of Russia's regions and the different dynamics in the spread of the virus across the country, the devolution seemed justified (Tóth-Czifra, 2020; Smyth et al., 2020). The problem was that such a sudden delegation of responsibility for managing the crisis to the regional level was not accompanied with sufficient federal transfers but contained a clear message that a failure to control the spread of the disease would be perceived as "criminal negligence" (Smeltzer, 2020; Tóth-Czifra, 2020; Vinokurov, 2020). In addition, the proposed decentralization looked temporary and limited in nature, serving the goal of shielding the federal government from the vulnerabilities associated with managing an unprecedented public health emergency (Tóth-Czifra, 2020; Smyth et al., 2020). Furthermore, it allowed the federal authorities to use the governors' performance during the pandemic as a pretext for firing those who failed to deliver, were unpopular in their regions or raised concerns about their loyalty. Needless to say, with many regional heads unprepared for the task, the devolution created frustration at the regional level and led to the resignation of several governors in the early stages of the pandemic (Krasnaia Liniia, 3 April 2020).

One of the biggest concerns raised by regional heads was related to the limited financial capabilities of regional budgets. As stated earlier, Russia's fiscal federalism is heavily centralized with relatively low levels of autonomy and responsibility for subnational governments as well as relatively strong fiscal rules and frameworks. According to Dynnikova et al. (2021), the Budget and Tax Codes establish multiple fiscal restrictions for sub-federal governments, including budget balance requirements, tax and expenditure limits, and constraints on borrowing, debt, and debt service (Dynnikova et al., 2021).

Given the centralized nature of Russia's fiscal relations and the unprecedented challenges faced by the regions, some experts, such as Alexei Kudrin, head of Russia's Audit Chamber, argued that a strong government stimulus package worth at least 7 percent of Russia's GDP was required to save the economy and to support the regions and businesses affected by the pandemic (The Moscow Times, 15 April 2020). However, the double shocks of Covid-19 and lower oil prices in 2020 complicated the situation and resulted in federal transfers that were substantially lower than the desirable level of commitment. Unveiled in mid-April of 2020, the government package of measures did not exceed 1.5–2 percent of Russia's GDP (The Moscow Times, 15 April 2020). What this essentially meant was that regions were expected to deal with the pandemic and its social and economic effects by moving around existing resources (Tóth-Czifra, 2020).

Furthermore, many governors were confused over the limits to their regional powers and frustrated over the limited capacity to handle the pandemic. So, for example, when they attempted to close their regional borders, the federal government sent a public warning that they "should not confuse regional and federal prerogatives" (Meduza, 6 April 2020).

In fact, many regions were simply unprepared for the task: they struggled to establish and enforce effective testing procedures and public health and infection control measures, had difficulty securing sufficient oxygen reserves at regional hospitals and were late with the supply of personal protective equipment for hospitals, long-term care homes and retirement homes (Vinokurov, 2020; Tóth-Czifra, 2020; Marrow, 2020). The decentralization revealed significant regional disparities in health care resources across the country, leading some governors, such as the governor of the Vladimir region, Vladimir Sipyagin, to publicly complain to Putin about the poor state of the healthcare system in his region (Tóth-Czifra, 2020). Several problems, including shortages of medical personnel, hospital beds and medications; a lack of ventilators in less affluent regions; shortages of personal protective equipment; and inadequate infection control measures, with some healthcare facilities turning into super spreaders of the virus, significantly complicated the situation and contributed to the growing scepticism among the public regarding the capacity of regional heads to contain the spread of the virus and maintain the quality and accessibility of Russia's health care services (The Moscow Times, 24 April 2020).

Since the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020, Russia has gone through three waves and is currently in its fourth wave, with daily cases and deaths reaching all-time highs. This lockdown ended abruptly in June 2020, when most regions,

including Moscow, lifted the restrictions, despite the fact that coronavirus cases continued to rise (Interfax, 1 June 2020; Rainsford, 2020). It is highly likely that the decision was driven by political and economic considerations, as shortly after the Russian authorities moved ahead with holding a landmark Victory Day parade on Red Square on June 24, followed by a nationwide vote on constitutional amendments starting on June 25. As a result, by fall 2020, Russia's total number of coronavirus cases had surpassed one million, making it the fourth country after the United States, Brazil and India to reach the milestone.

Just before the second wave gained pace in September of 2020, the Russian government announced the registration of the world's first coronavirus vaccine, which was named "Sputnik V", followed by the approval of the second vaccine in October 2020. Placing great hopes in the capacity of the vaccination campaign to curb the number of cases, the government decided against another nationwide non-working period but gave regional heads the green light to introduce temporary lockdowns, close schools and enforce other measures if the number of cases continued to climb. And they did: by early December 2020, the rate of daily infections jumped to nearly thirty thousand, forcing the government to speed up the start of the vaccination campaign, again with no strict lockdown measures announced. The campaign began in Moscow on December 5th and extended to all Russian regions by December 15th, with the authorities calling on teachers, doctors and social workers to get their first jabs of Sputnik V.

These calls, however, were not heard. Several months after the start of the vaccination campaign, the Russian population demonstrated one of the highest vaccination hesitancy rates in the world. A poll by the Levada Center found that more than 62 percent of Russian respondents were not ready to get vaccinated with Sputnik V, with younger respondents in particular being more reluctant (Novaya Gazeta, 12 May 2021). By the end of June 2021, only 13 percent of Russians had received both jabs – compared with more than half of Americans and 87 percent of Icelanders (Mirovalev, 2021). Coupled with overwhelming ignorance among Russians about wearing masks, maintaining social distancing and taking Covid tests, the massive vaccination hesitancy contributed to the onset of the third wave over the summer of 2021 with more than twenty thousand new cases reported on a daily basis (Kim, 2021). Since then, the spread of the virus has continued unabated, with the daily number of infections and deaths reaching all-time highs during the fourth wave in the fall of 2021 (The Moscow Times, 9 November 2021). As the number of infections climbed to over 36,000 daily cases with more than 1,000 daily deaths

in late October, the Russian government went ahead with another weeklong nationwide paid holiday starting from 30 October 2021. The order was promptly followed by Moscow and other regions announcing weeklong partial lockdowns and closures of the most non-essential services (The Moscow Times, 10 December 2021). As of, 2021, Russia has confirmed 9,956,679 cases of coronavirus and 287,180 deaths, according to the national coronavirus information center (The Moscow Times, 10 December 2021).

The authorities deployed different strategies to speed up the vaccination campaign. So, for example, in the summer of 2021, some regions tried to attract people to vaccination centres with cash, gift certificates, lotteries and free tickets to movie theatres or museums. Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin even announced that the city would give away five cars every week to vaccinated residents. None of these incentives, however, produced a significant increase in vaccination rates. And so when the fourth wave surged in the fall of 2021, many regions reconsidered their lenient approach to vaccination and went in the direction of tightening the rules. Surprisingly enough, this happened simultaneously with President Putin stressing that Covid-19 vaccination should remain a voluntary decision. In fact, the gradual tightening of vaccination policies had started already in the summer of 2021, when some regional heads, including Moscow's mayor Sergey Sobyanin, introduced a compulsory 60 percent vaccination rate for businesses operating in the service sectors and some popular tourist destinations such as Sochi, a beach resort city on the Black Sea, imposed travel restrictions requiring all travellers to prove their vaccination status or arrive with a negative Covid-19 test (The Moscow Times, 16 June 2021). By the end of October, all of Russia's 85 regions had mandated vaccines for certain categories of workers, and many regions announced that QR code passes would now be required for access to all public places, restaurants and intercity trains and planes in a radical move designed to boost Russia's slow vaccination campaign. Some cities, such as St. Petersburg, ordered mandatory vaccination for all residents over 60 years old as well as people with certain chronic illnesses (The Moscow Times, 10 December 2021). The new policies did result in a modest uptick in national vaccination rates, but also led to numerous protests and the development of a market offering fake Covid-19 vaccination certificates (Coalson, 2021). As of December 10, 2021, 41.2 percent of the Russian population has received two vaccines against Covid-19 (Russia: Coronavirus Pandemic Country Profile, n.d.). While promising, these numbers are still far below the recommended threshold of 70 percent that is deemed necessary to contain the spread of the virus.

Several factors can explain vaccine scepticism in Russia, including concerns over the safety of the vaccine, conspiracy theories widely circulating on social media and inconsistent public health messaging that has been accompanied by ineffective management of the pandemic and limited socioeconomic support measures. In addition, the Soviet culture of non-disclosure still prevalent among Russian public officials, coupled with a long-standing distrust of the public authorities among the Russian population, has contributed to vaccine hesitancy (King and Mukhina, 2021). To begin with, the speed with which Sputnik V was introduced on the Russian market, a year before the completion of the third phase of clinical trials, the initial scepticism of the international scientific community toward the vaccine and the delays in its international approval dampened the image of the vaccine in Russia and led the population to question the safety of the vaccine (Brown, 2020). And even though later studies, including one published in the medical journal The Lancet, have pointed to the effectiveness of the Sputnik vaccine, many Russians remain unconvinced. This concern was confirmed by an independent survey that explored Russians' resistance to vaccination (Berman, 2021). In that study, 33 percent of people surveyed said they were fearful of side effects, 20 percent stated that they were waiting for the completion of clinical trials, and 16 percent saw no reason to get vaccinated (Berman, 2021). In addition, widespread belief in various conspiracy theories have contributed to the fact that a staggering 64 percent of Russians believe the coronavirus was invented in a lab, and 69 percent are not afraid of catching the virus, as they firmly believe the dangers of Covid-19 have been exaggerated (Yablokov, 2021).

Furthermore, the legacies of the Soviet past, combined with pre-existing distrust of the government among the Russian population, the inconsistent public health messaging and limited socioeconomic relief measures have made vaccine resistance particularly strong in the case of Russia. As Shok and Beliakova (2020) argue, the pandemic revealed the lingering Soviet legacies affecting the governance process and state-society relations, best described as a culture of non-disclosure. During the pandemic, the culture of non-disclosure manifested itself in the inconsistency in the government approach. With the federal authorities first taking the decisive steps to close national borders but then framing the temporary quarantine measures as "days off regime," meaning a vacation from work obligations, and moving the bulk of the responsibility for managing the pandemic to the regional governments, the government sent the public a contradictory message about the seriousness of the virus outbreak, which resulted in numerous conspiracy theories. Furthermore, by downplaying the seriousness of the virus outbreak and failing to properly report on

the challenges and shortages faced by the Russian healthcare system, which were obvious to many observers across the country and reported on by independent media and social networks, the government further exacerbated the pre-existing mistrust in the state institutions, the health care system and medical professionals. The low levels of trust in the healthcare system were reported long before the pandemic, with one public opinion poll conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center in 2019 showing that 41 percent of Russians did not trust medical professionals (RBC, 11 December 2019). The pandemic arguably contributed to a further decline in the public trust in the Russian healthcare system and government institutions overall (Trudolyubov, 2020). This trend was confirmed by the deputy speaker of Russia's parliament, Petr Tolstoy, who admitted in October 2021 that "the government lost the information campaign on the fight against coronavirus" (Sauer, 2021). This was echoed by Denis Volkov, the director of the independent polling organisation the Levada Center, who stated that the government had sent "far too many mixed messages to the public about the pandemic" (Sauer, 2021).

In addition, the discrepancy in the official and alternative data on the spread of the virus, coupled with an amendment to the Russian Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offences on 31 March 2020 that introduced criminal penalties for "public dissemination of knowingly false information" in the context of emergencies as well as administrative penalties for media outlets that publish such information, further convinced many Russians that the government was not to be trusted (Amnesty International, 3 April 2020; Trudolyubov, 2020; Kataeva, 2020; Dzutsati, 2020). And the failure of many regional heads to contain the virus and address the needs of the population in times of a public health emergency only worked to reinforce the public mistrust in state institutions, sometimes leading to open conflicts with the authorities. So, for example, in the republic of North Ossetia–Alania, an estimated 2,000 people gathered on the square in front of the government building in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia's capital, on 20 April 2020. The demonstrators demanded the resignation of the regional governor, Vyacheslav Bitarov, the release of a popular activist from police custody and the improvement of economic conditions (Kataeva, 2020; Dzutsati, 2020). When the police and the Russian National Guard began forcefully dispersing the protesters, some threw cobblestones at the officials. Eventually, the government's forces cleared the city center and arrested dozens of rally participants (Kataeva, 2020; Dzutsati, 2020). Residents of other republics in the region, particularly Dagestan, also demonstrated a high level of dissatisfaction with the authorities,

complaining about the poor state of the republic's healthcare system, the strict self-isolation measures imposed by the regional governments to contain the virus and the government's failure to offer adequate relief measures to support the struggling regional economy, businesses and individuals (Dzutsati, 2020). As the popularity of Dagestan's governor, Vladimir Vasiliev, declined, he tried to delegate responsibility for the enforcement of the self-isolation order to municipal authorities, which ended in a complete fiasco (Dzutsati, 2020). Ineffective management of the pandemic was also reported in other regions across the country, including St. Petersburg, further exacerbating long-standing tensions between the state and the people and fuelling the culture of resistance to the authorities across the country.

As some scholars argued, the grievances and frustration over the limited and short-term government support offered to businesses and the population during the pandemic provide an additional explanation for Russians' widespread defiance of government self-isolation orders, the great unpopularity of lockdowns and the overall scepticism toward government-provided information about the virus and official data on the spread of the disease. According to Tarasenko (2021) and Cook and Twigg (2020), Russia's overall social policy response to the pandemic was characterized by temporary short-term measures, was limited in scope and often failed to reach some of the most vulnerable population groups. The first mention of COVID-related social relief and economic measures was made in the President's Address to the Nation on 25th March 2020. In the social sphere, the government promised an automatic extension of social benefits without the need to submit any additional information or apply to the authorities in person for the period of the next six months, additional cash transfers for families with children, some temporary support measures to the unemployed and to healthcare and social workers, a moratorium on cutting utility services for debts and fines for late payments from April 1 to December 31, 2020, and several other measures. Families with children received the most support, with the government introducing new policy measures to tackle the adverse effects of the pandemic and increasing funding for the existing policies (Tarasenko, 2021). So, for example, the government announced a one-time payment of 10,000 roubles per child aged 3 to 16 starting 1 June 2020. It also offered all Russian families with children under 3 another support measure in the amount of 5,000 roubles per child for the months of April, May and June of 2020. In addition, the regular monthly payments to eligible families with children were increased, and some regions offered additional one-time payments to families

from regional budgets (Tarasenko, 2021; World Bank, 2020). The government also offered healthcare and social workers who worked on the front line of the coronavirus outbreak financial bonuses, with payments calculated based on the qualifications of employees and on whether they worked directly with coronavirus patients (Russian Government, 18 May 2020).

In addition, the government promised some economic support measures, including a corporate tax holiday for six months, a reduction of social taxes businesses have to pay for their employees and a six-month deferral on rent payments. Later on, the government also published a list of organizations that were important to the Russian economy and hence eligible to receive government support if necessary (Sherwin, 2020). With some delay, the authorities also launched a series of programs including tax deferrals, a bankruptcy moratorium and interest-free loans to help small and medium enterprises (SMEs). These measures, however, proved to be insufficient to address the needs of SMEs, with many businesses struggling to survive and many more shutting down (Sherwin, 2020; Isachenkov, 2020; Peremitin and Tkachev, 2021). As a result, given the limited scope of the social and economic support measures, many citizens considered this to be evidence of the government's overall neglect of the people's needs, with many questioning the sincerity of the government's message and choosing to defy the government orders in order to secure their incomes and maintain their livelihoods (Trudolyubov, 2020).

In conclusion, in trying to uncover the causes of the Russian government's suboptimal response to Covid-19, several factors were identified. First, the authoritarian and overly centralized nature of Russia's political institutions, which prioritized political considerations and concerns about regime legitimacy over public safety and discouraged genuine regional initiative, undermined the government's ability to contain the pandemic. The regional heads often lacked the skills, resources and authority to implement the necessary policies and containment measures, resulting in disastrous developments in several Russian regions. Second, the Soviet legacies associated with a culture of non-disclosure coupled with the inconsistent public health messaging during the pandemic and the lack of an adequate safety net and economic support in times of crisis contributed to the public mistrust in state institutions, pointing to fraught relations between citizens and the state. This was reflected in popular resistance to government orders, including the widespread defiance of lockdown instructions, a refusal to wear masks in public places and low vaccination rates.

CONCLUSION

The Russian government's struggle to contain the public health crisis revealed several issues characteristic of hybrid regimes with poor governance mechanisms and low levels of public trust in state institutions. The concept of a hybrid regime includes different variations of non-democratic or partially democratic polities, which share a number of common features. These include flawed electoral competition, weak governmental accountability, high levels of corruption, poor governance, and low levels of trust in state institutions as well as a sense of collective public frustration about the government performance, with the possibility of social conflicts undermining the sustainability of such regimes in the long run. While not all hybrid regimes display these features, the majority of them do, though the extent to which these issues undermine the regime's performance and stability differs dramatically across countries.

In the case of Russia, the electoral authoritarian system established under Putin's leadership used the super presidential system to establish a vertical chain of hierarchical authority, with a strong government at the top and unconditional discipline expected from the lower levels in the power vertical. Designed to operate as a smoothly functioning top-down technocratic state, state institutions came under tremendous pressure following the onset of a public health emergency, which required swift and decisive action and threatened to undermine the regime's stability. As a temporary solution, the federal government transferred the responsibility for managing the crisis to the regional level, partially to shift the blame but also to allow for a more diversified and regionally based approach in the fight against the pandemic. However, as the Russian case vividly demonstrated, the devolution of authority to the lower level without substantial changes in the institutional structure and fiscal relations created more problems than expected, highlighting the flaws in the established vertical of power, and contributed to greater scepticism among the Russian public toward the sincerity of the government actions and the capacity of the state to handle the pandemic.

Other factors, including a lingering Soviet culture of non-disclosure, along with confusing public health messaging and discrepancies in the official and alternative data on the spread of the virus, seemed to further reinforce the public mistrust of the government and state institutions, while the lack of a comprehensive safety net left many citizens to cling to their jobs and evade government restrictions. As a result, a peculiar culture of civil disobedience to government orders developed in Russia exemplified by the defiance of

public health measures and widespread vaccine hesitancy. It remains to be seen how the declining level of public trust in state institutions and the growing dissatisfaction with the government performance will affect the Russian political system. What is evident, however, is that the current public health crisis contributed to a growing division between the state and its people.

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