

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON RUSSIAN POLITICS

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Abstract

The COVID 19 pandemic has not spared any nation in the world. It has perforated each and every aspect of human life, having significant political, economic, as well as social implications. This paper would discuss what the political impact the pandemic has on the Russian Federation. The paper would be focusing on how the people have reacted to the handling of the situation by the Russian government. The core question, that would be analyzed, is how the occurrence of significant political events has impacted the political climate of Russia, and how the people are losing faith in their government. The aim has been to answer this question in the paper through an empirical analysis of the data collected from an array of sources.

Keywords

COVID 19, pandemic, politics, Russia, protest, Belarus, revolution.

Introduction

Russia is not a country that does not have problems (Alexseev, et al. 2020). Even Before the pandemic, Russia was rendered to be the weakest of the great powers (Biscop 2020). The pandemic is testing the governance skills of the Kremlin and Putin. It has seen many great powers, like the United States of America, succumb. The recent loss of Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential elections (Bryant 2020), is a direct consequence of his failure to tackle the pandemic appropriately.

Putin took control of Russia almost twenty years, before Donald Trump, to 'Make Russia Great Again' (Burrett 2020), and it is this pandemic which will test the capability of Putin to make Russia great, again.

The people are angry at Putin for many reasons and accompanied with major unanswered questions on whether Russia would remain politically intact after the pandemic passes, hinting at a probable revolution.

Taking into account the conditions in Russia, one could expect the outbreak of a left-wing revolution. All factors which are considered essentials for a revolution to take place are present in the current political climate of Russia. These include mass frustration, division of the elites, a unifying motivation, and a permissive world context (DeFronzo 2011). We see how the first characteristic is satisfied through the organization of virtual protests, and the second one through the discrepancies between Putin's allies. A unifying motive is provided as everyone has to suffer through some sort of problems due to the virus; the pandemic unifies the people. Lastly, revolutions in Belarus and other Eurasian and Latin American countries provide a sufficient climate for revolution. This paper would analyse how a revolution might be brought about in Russia.

Losing faith in the Government

The Kremlin thrives on the belief that it is a grandiose structure in the eyes of the Russians, but this belief is on the verge of shattering since the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic. Russians are fed up with his nationalist populism (Burrett2020), and they yearn for actual reforms. As the pandemic progresses, the belief of the people in the government weakens continuously. As per the Russian Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), around one-third of the respondents do not believe that the nation's healthcare system is

competent to strategically handle the pandemic. The proportion of the respondents who believe that the government is taking the wrong steps is increasing and even reached 55%, which is surprising for a country like Russia. Furthermore, according to FOM surveys, more than 50% of Russians feel they might lose their jobs due to the pandemic, which is a matter of concern in itself. (Zavadskaya and Sokolov2020)

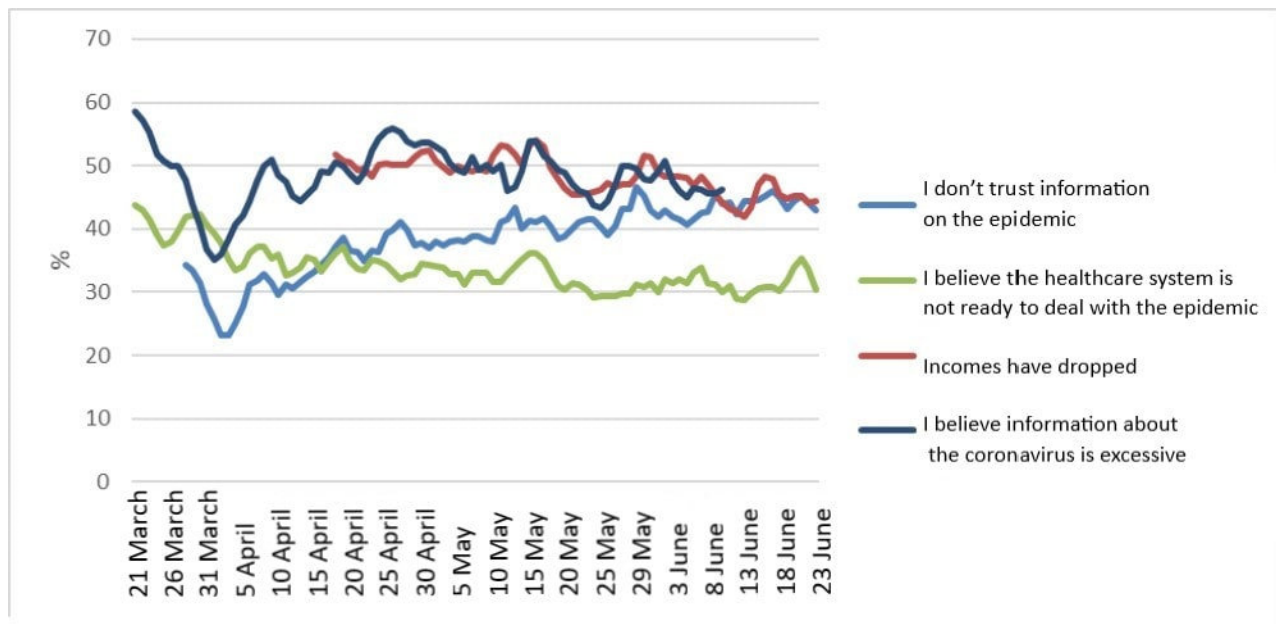


Figure 2: Fear of the pandemic and support for the Russian government's initiatives.

Source: Laboratory for Comparative Social Research by the Higher School of Economics National Research University

According to research conducted by the European University at St. Petersburg, on a scale of 0 to 4 on the effectiveness of the government in handling the crisis, Russia stands at

1.79. On a scale of 1 to 3, the level of confidence in the government is 1.1, and the level of confidence in the healthcare institutions lies at 1.06 (Zavadskaya and Sokolov 2020). These are not promising numbers and show how people are losing trust in the government they have chosen to keep in power till 2036. We must take note of the fact that the proportion of those who are not very concerned about health is noticeably higher among groups with opposite opinions on the effectiveness of the government's response to the crisis, (Zavadskaya and Sokolov 2020), as seen in the figure below.

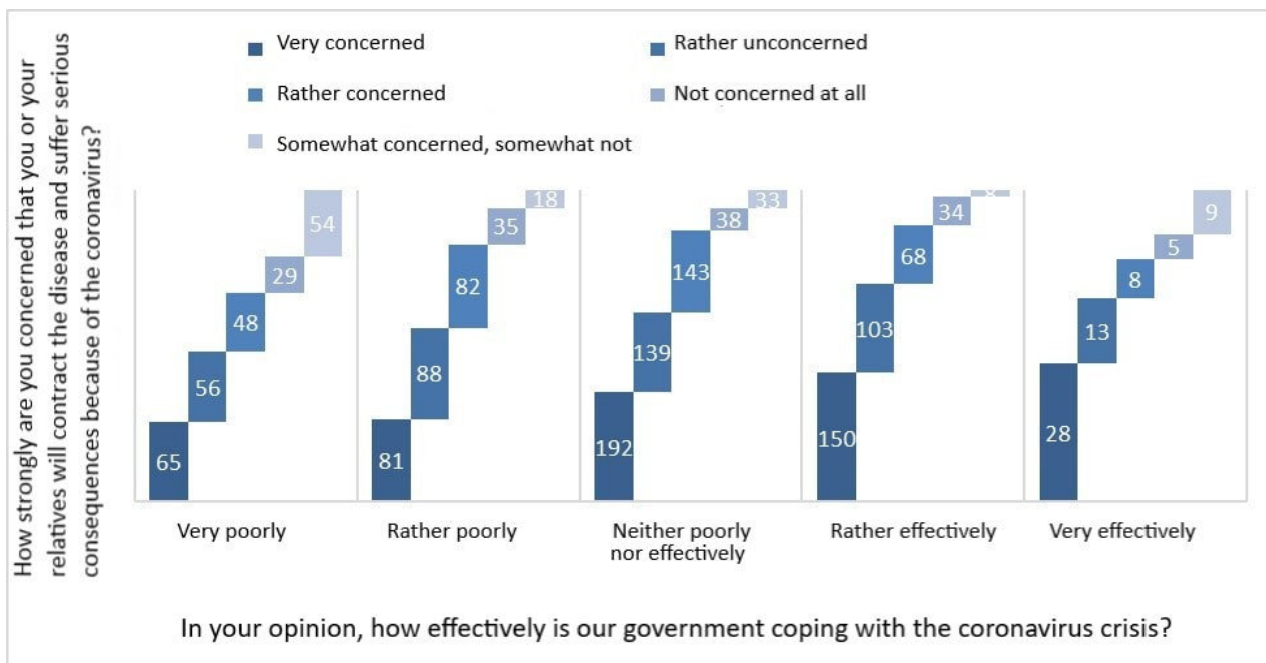


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Ambiguity of data

Since the Kremlin decided to postpone the referendum on the constitutional changes, as well as the 75th anniversary of the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany to July 1, 2020 (Higgins 2020), it can be argued that Putin is trying to show to the world and his people that he is performing better than rest of the world leaders. Russia is trying to sabotage the figures and to manipulate the world, which does not come as a surprise for all. Any relevant information relating to the pandemic cannot be discussed without the person obtaining a "license to inform", failure of which might lead to a criminal sentence, which clearly shows that the government is trying to establish a monopoly on the data and the information which is required to battle the virus (Oleinik 2020). The Russian people can juxtapose the reality with the image the government is trying to portray to the world. The government reports of the mortality rates are suspiciously low, to which Tatiana Golikova, the top health official of Russia, says is that the government is using "extremely precise modes of determining the causes of death", and that it would never manipulate official statistics or data (Roth 2020). Russia reported a fatality rate of 0.9% in May, with only 2300 deaths. This is exceptionally low, compared to other nations, not just in the West. Upon investigation it was found out that Moscow did not account for 60% of the deaths, stating that autopsies report showed causes different than COVID 19. Another factor which reduced the number of deaths was that the Russian Ministry of Health was to maintain separate records for healthcare workers who were dying of COVID, masquerading this as a 'memorial list'. As of June, there were 600 deaths which were a

part of the list (Gabow 2020). Even if these deaths were added to the death toll, Russia would still be lower than the other nations, which spread doubt across the global health community.

Moscow attributes its low mortality rate to an 'exceptionally precise' method of ascribing cause of death

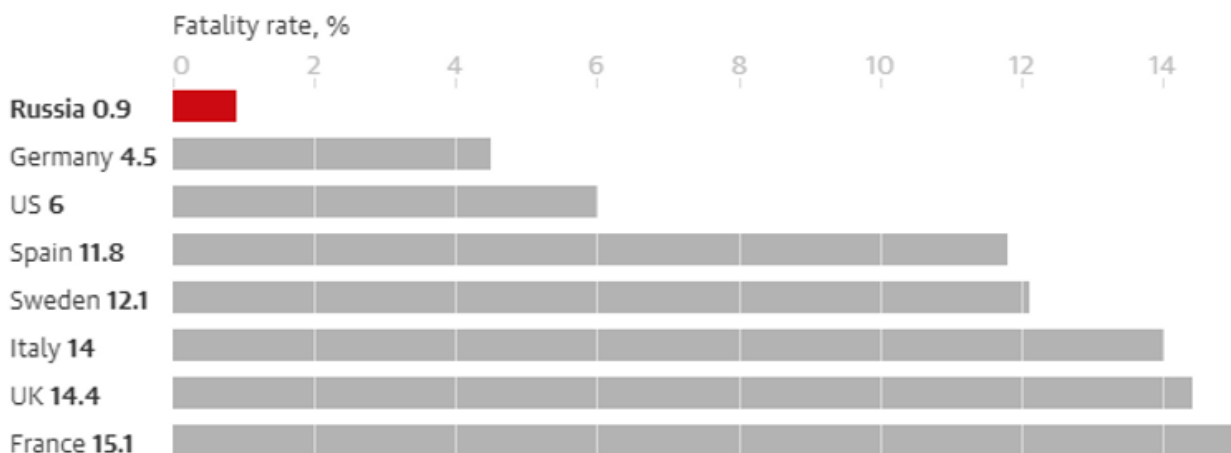


Figure 3: Fatality rates as of May 2020.

Source: John Hopkins University / Graphic: The Guardian

Russia's fatality rate was 7.6 times less compared to the world average, as reported by Golikova (Roth 2020). Again, Kremlin said that the reason for this is the variations in the methods of counting the fatalities. Tatiana Mikhailova, a senior research fellow at the *Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration* says that "It is not worth directly comparing [mortality rates] in various countries as they use different methods of classifying the cause of death," (Roth2020). However, when compared with a log scale data by the *John Hopkins University*, (show in the figure below) it was discovered that there were still discrepancies with the tallying of data provided by the Russian government. All this to show that Putin has been able to minimise the deaths of his citizens, despite facing a large number of cases. The obsession of the Russian premier with his image in front of his citizens, and with his country's image in front of the world, is leading to a healthcare and political catastrophe in Russia.

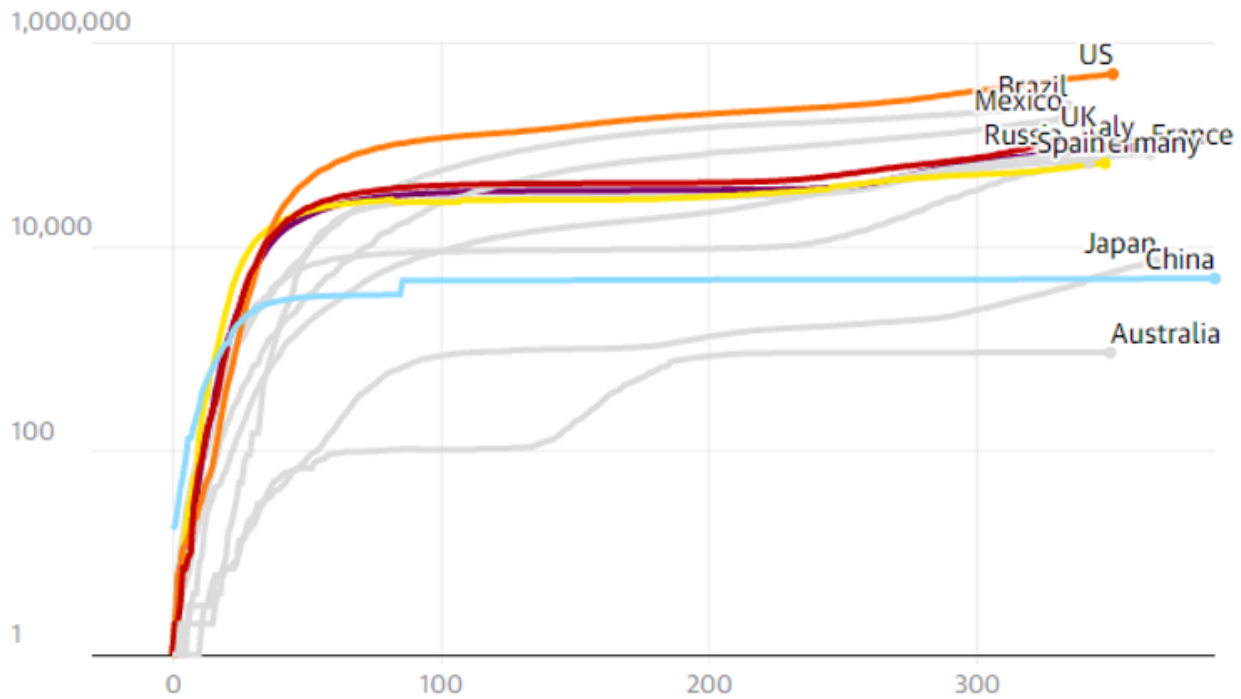


Figure 4: Log scale valuation of deaths per number of cases.

Source: John Hopkins University.

Concerns of Citizens

Putin's personal interactions are also becoming a cause of the gradual demise of the Russian Federation. It is not just the loss of work and money which is affecting the people, it is the loss of life as well. The Russian Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres (ALACs) joined hands with the Russian Anti-Virus Emergency Network (RAVEN) (Transparency 2020) to investigate the deaths of the five people in St. Petersburg, on the morning of May the 12th, in the St. George Hospital. The deaths took place due to a fire that broke out, due to a malfunction in some ventilators present in the hospital. The ventilators were manufactured by Rostec State Corporation, owned, and controlled by Sergey Chemezov, who is Vladimir Putin's close ally. 90% of the ventilator is assembled from foreign components, mainly comprising of American parts supplied by Chinese companies (Dolinina 2020). Furthermore, it was alleged that the corporation overcharged the hospitals for the ventilators and used government decrees to try to coerce medical institutions into buying all medical equipment from them. This looked rather bad for the Kremlin, as the owner, Chemezov, was its famous ally, and his acts exposed the hypocritical and corrupt policies of the Duma, which allowed a private enterprise to use government decrees to impose orders. This has a significant political impact on Putin's name, as the people lose faith in their premier, and doubt his ability to handle the crisis.

The condition of the prisoners, who are more oppressed than the normal citizens, must also be brought out. The Federal Prison Service of Russia (FPS) has become an opaque institution, as prisoners are desperate to seek redressal. Due to the pandemic, numerous inmates who were sanctioned to be given amnesty, have been left without any hopes, as the FPS is adamant about releasing these prisoners. The traditional repudiation of prisoners on the Victory Day Parade has been discontinued due to the postponement of the event as well (Sauer and Gershkovich 2020). This, coupled with the fact that the prisoners are made to work extra hours, in unsanitary facilities without any COVID preventive equipment, has caused the prisoners to riot. The April 10 riot in Angarsk, Moscow (Volochine 2020) has sent a message to the Kremlin, that they need to take note of the conditions of the prisoners. Russia is reminiscing its Gulag days, and that would be the last thing a populist president would want.

Russia has decided not to halt the construction of its 7.4 Billion Euro project, Nord Stream 2, which is being developed by the state-owned Gazprom, and the pandemic is said to have no impact on its implementation (Martin 2020). Several Kremlin critics have voiced their concerns over this, as Russia is using its resources towards secondary industries. During a pandemic, support, if given, should be given to all firms belonging to the same sector (Mau 2020). In a time where healthcare is the most important concern for the entire world, we see the Russian premier focusing on building a pipeline that is meant to serve the rich as a luxury, destroying the hopes of the common man, who yearns for liberal economic policies. The role political process is given a preference over the economic requirements, during a period of national awareness (Mau 2020). Russia has already been paying economically, since its annexation of Crimea, in terms of sanctions and isolation of the peninsula (Hansen 2020), and the heavy expenditure on this project is further picking the taxpayers pocket, who want their money to be used wisely.

Issues Regarding the Referendum

The Russian Amendment Act prohibits all forms of coercion that might be involved in the voting process (Shevchenko 2020). As *Golos Movement*¹ reports, this was not at all followed by the Russian government, and the Kremlin took advantage of the pandemic to keep Putin in power until 2036, through the referendum on the constitutional amendments. Citizens were forced to vote for a particular side of the political spectrum, the copies of the new changes were distributed in local libraries, and there was no independent scrutiny of the votes given during the period. The amendments also banned same-sex marriages in Russia, and it is concerning how the people have decided to vote. There have been several criticisms of the referendum, including Alexei Navalny stating that “results do not have anything in common with people’s views” (Korolyov 2020). On

preparing a correlation analysis between the reports of polling stations and the Central Election Commission (as seen below), Sergei Shpilkin exposed the Kremlin's skulduggery, by showing how 22 million votes were cast fraudulently (Tairov 2020).

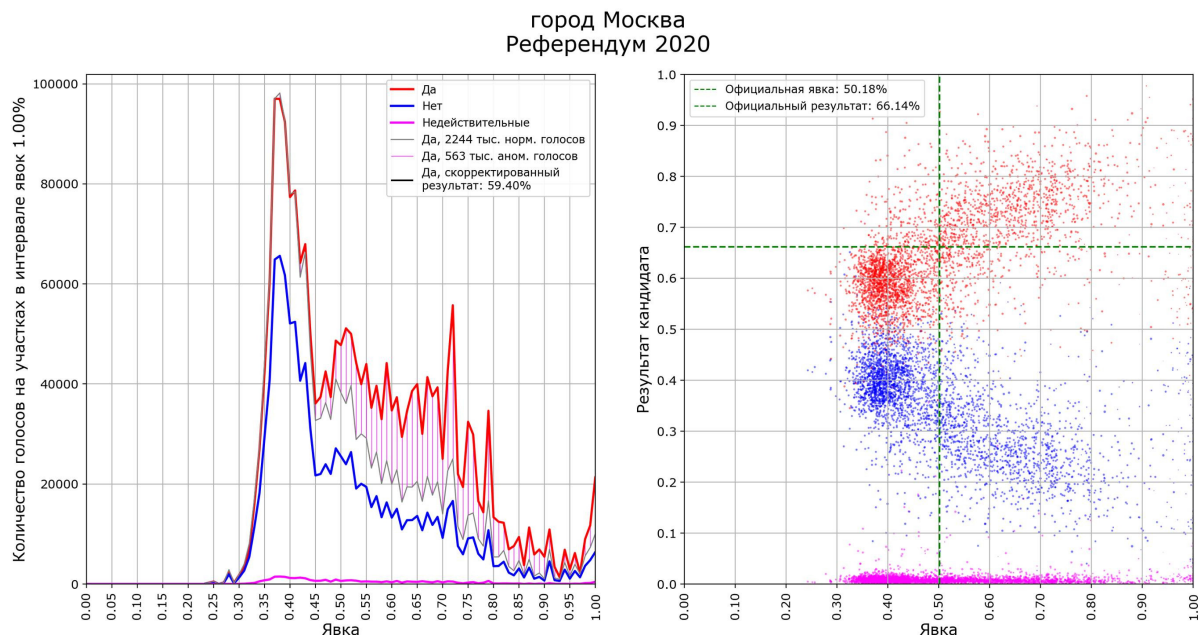


Figure 5: Correlation Analysis of the Votes.

Source: Sergey Shpilkin

After all the ballots were counted, it was declared that 77.9% of people voted for the amendments, while 21.3% voted against (Gabowitsch 2020). It is important to note that the mainland has not voted favourably towards the amendments, while regions like Tuva, Chechnya and Crimea have been more favourable of the changes (seen below). The pandemic has had a really important role to play in this since these regions lie at the borders of Russia. Because of the pandemic, Russia was forced to shut down its borders, which decreased the hostilities in the regions, as there was a stricter check on illegal arms entering the country. Thus, the pandemic, rather, the decision taken by the government to tackle the pandemic, provided some relief to citizens of these areas. Therefore, they chose to keep Putin in the seat until 2036. This is why, in some way, the pandemic has helped Putin retain power. Through winning the elections, Putin has been able to play his trademark 'stability' card, which is the strongest political tool in possession of the Kremlin.

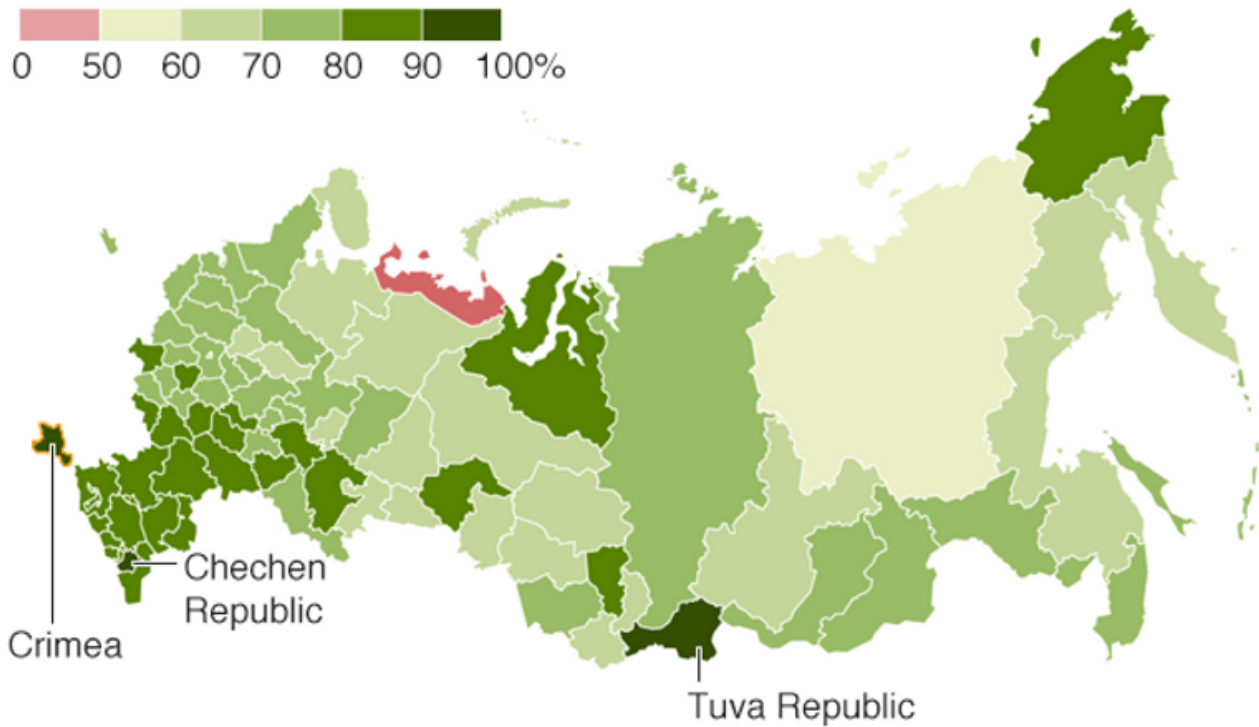


Figure 6: Distribution of votes across Russia.

Source: Central Election Commission of Russia

The COVID-19 Vaccine and Health Concerns

Russia has been working on more than fifty different vaccine projects, and drugs like Avifavir and IIsira received temporary registrations (Kundu 2020). In an attempt to exert political dominance, on August 11, the Kremlin announced that it is rolling out the first vaccine of the coronavirus in the world, the Sputnik V, developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology. The vaccine has faced criticism by scientists across the world, due to questions about its safety and efficiency. Once again, it is up to speculations, since the government has not released any official data about its trials. It is alleged that phase III trials might be conducted in the UAE or Saudi Arabia, though there is no official confirmation of the same (Callaway 2020). Failure of the vaccine would not only put the lives of the volunteers at risk but also make the population lose trust in a Russian vaccine. Thus, the failure of the vaccine and its speculative nature could be harmful for the Kremlin's reputation, both domestically and internationally, which is the last thing Putin would want.

The Russians are already losing faith in their healthcare system, since, at the inception of the pandemic, Russia had allocated most of its medical resources towards the treatment of the virus, instead of refinancing new resources. Due to this, other health emergencies were ignored, which enraged the people, who were left behind without a discourse. The centralised healthcare system of Russia acted as an impediment in responding quickly and accurately to the virus, as samples from the entire nation were processed at a single lab in Novosibirsk (Gabowitsch 2020), which caused delays in the tests, as well as contaminated the samples frequently. Furthermore, another issue that has troubled the people, is that the healthcare officials are not provided with proper medical equipment, and sanitisation of the medical facilities is ignored. This has caused the deaths of more than six hundred doctors, and other medical workers, which is extremely concerning as the frontline workers are afraid to fulfil their duties. There have been a lot of workers, who have not received the honour of being revered as *'dying on duty'*, as their deaths were not counted as COVID deaths, but as pneumonic ones. This enraged people and the families of the workers, as they deserve their due credit. Online websites have been made to pay homage to these workers (as seen below), but they want government acknowledgement.

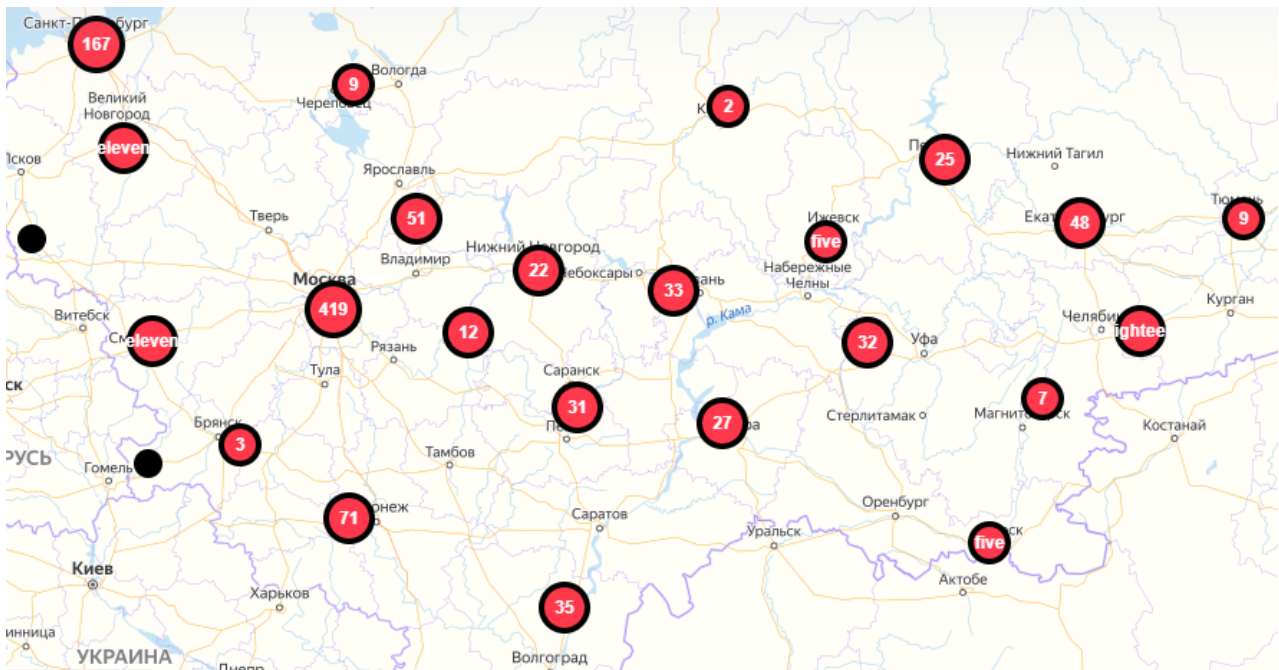


Figure 7: Unreported deaths of healthcare workers.

Source: Alyansvrache

Comparison with Belarus

Juxtaposing the situation in Russia to its counterpart Union State, Belarus, one could find certain similarities between the conditions of the two nations. Alexander Lukashenko, the president of Belarus has failed to tackle the coronavirus crisis seriously, and as a result, is facing a revolution, the strongest one is its history. Lukashenko has treated the pandemic as a common cold and failed to implement any timely lockdowns in Belarus (Kramer 2020). This led to an economic collapse of the country, and Minsk failed to accept the Kremlin's offer for stronger economic and political integration. Since Lukashenko had tried to mask himself as a protector of the sovereignty of Belarus, the country now lies in shatters (Baev 2020). Russia's stand towards this is extremely unclear, as Russian politicians have openly criticized Lukashenko, while the state media has been rallying for its support. This confusion lies due to the absence of a handbook issued by the Duma, which would dictate the national policy (Pertsev 2020).

Now, comparing the conditions, just as Lukashenko failed to understand the seriousness of the pandemic, Putin was insistent on tightening restriction but was not comfortable setting up a lockdown. This is when Russia recorded more than 15,000 cases in a day, during October (Sherwin 2020). Both the nations paid too much emphasis on the economy, neglecting basic healthcare requirements. Neither Russia, nor Belarus was able to handle the economic situation appropriately, as the Belarusian GDP growth dropped to a 25 year low of 4% (World Bank 2020), and the contraction of Russia's GDP growth by 6% (World Bank 2020). The other similarity is the political ideologies and the personalities of the leaders. Both Putin and Lukashenko paid too much emphasis on public image and failed to get actual work done. However, the only difference lies in the fact that the Belarusians were able to call out Lukashenko's bluff and took to the streets, while it is not long before the Russians do the same.

Protests During A Pandemic

Since it has become close to impossible to raise one's voice on the streets in Russia, the people have taken to the virtual streets to express their opinions. The government is using the pandemic as an excuse and as a tool to oppress their voices, by imposing and strengthening lockdown rules and regulations after the results of the referendum. The lockdown is used to limit civic movement in the country (Luhn 2020). The Kremlin reached a new low when it offered just 3,000 roubles (approximately \$40) to those who lost their jobs (Rainsford 2020), without any commitment, nor motivation of providing additional employment opportunities, or financial aid. People have declared an online protest for a multitude of reasons, like the unconstitutionality of the referendum, the economic fall apart, the ineffective healthcare decisions, unleashing Pandora's box, which is dubbed as "ForLife". Russia epitomises the fact that innovation prevails oppression as people have found a new way to protest. The Russian equivalent of Google Maps is

Yandex Maps (<https://yandex.com/maps/>). This application has a feature which allows people to warn others about roadside emergencies. Using this feature, people are posting concerns of the country, like “People don’t have anything to eat” and “We can’t repeat 1917”, on the space where the traffic issues are addressed (Arno2020).

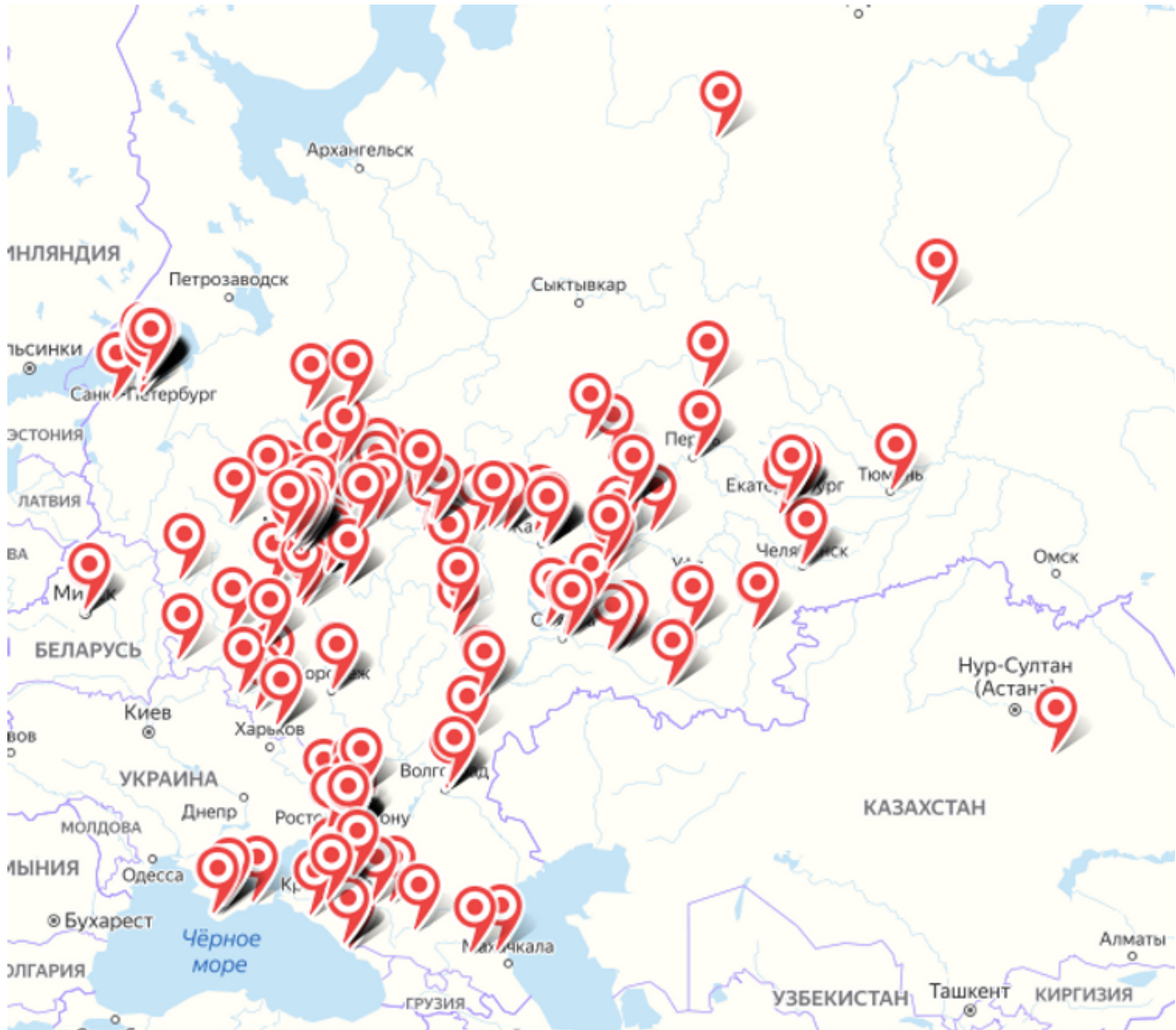


Figure 8: Russians protesting on Yandex

Source: <http://probkatalks.ru/>

As the website was flooded with comments which were critical of government policies, the Kremlin was quick enough to take down all message that disapproved of Putin’s actions. Below, the image shows that the comments of the users in Tyumen were deleted in less than 10 minutes of being posted. However, this has brought significant change in the political climate of Russia. Before the pandemic, when the number of protestors did not exceed a few hundred, is now soaring up to thousands and hundreds of thousands

(Sherwin 2020). We see how the pandemic may have instilled within people a desire to speak up, and even provide people who wished to speak up a platform to speak in. According to Yuri Levada Academic Centre, only 8% of the participants of the virtual protest would take part in actual protest (Levada 2020).

Conclusion

“Putinism will not last forever” (Keil and Kimmage 2020). People are losing faith in the government, and they are taking to the virtual streets. The Kremlin is hiding data from the world and has failed to provide for its people. Putin is trying to introduce democracy in the Russian political framework, by establishing a balance in the power between the Duma and the Kremlin (Cohen 2020). This seems to be the way forward for Russia to regain its lost image. As power transfers from the Kremlin to the Duma, the Russians can hope for better things coming for them. The pandemic might be the end of the authoritarian Russia we once knew of.

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