



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
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Related Categories: Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Global Health; Russia

RUSSIA'S MISLEADING CORONAVIRUS TALLY

The Kremlin's official line is that the country's rapidly expanding infection rate but low death toll is a reflection of how well the government is managing the current global coronavirus crisis. A deeper dive, however, suggests a rather different story. Data analysis by the *Financial Times* has concluded that the number of COVID19 deaths in Moscow and Saint Petersburg could be as much as 70% higher than what is officially being reported. Of the 2,073 "additional" deaths that struck the two cities last month, in comparison to preceding years, only 629 have officially been attributed to the coronavirus, with the remaining 1,444 explained by other causes - even though, if Russia followed the example of other nations, those too would be added to the total. Such attribution, however, is strongly discouraged by Russian authorities, who have attempted to brand contradictions to the official coronavirus tallies as fake news and outlaw their publication. (*Financial Times*, May 5, 2020)

CONSEQUENCES OF THE CRISIS: A LESS POPULAR PUTIN

For the first time since his initial rise to power in 1999, Vladimir Putin's approval ratings dropped to 59% in the month of April. The poll was conducted by the Levada Center, one of Russia's few remaining independent polling organizations. Observers have seen a steady decline in the president's approval since the coronavirus outbreak, which to date has claimed over 1,500 lives in Russia and routinely produces days of 10,000 or more newly reported infections. The figures represent a massive decline; as recently as February, the number of Russian citizens who approved of Putin and his government stood at 69%. (*CNBC*, May 6, 2020)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Given the effect of Russia's increasingly authoritarian political climate on pollsters and respondents alike, the results of public opinion surveys in Russia should be viewed with some caution.]

A TALE OF TWO VICTORY DAYS

The 75th iteration of Victory Day came and went in Russia without much public fanfare. Parades across the country, including the most famous one, which takes place annually in Moscow, were postponed indefinitely earlier this month. The images of relatives that used to be carried and displayed as a part of "Immortal Regiment" marches were confined to windowsills and balconies, while state television aired reruns of parades from years past and other patriotic programming. The only official commemoration came from President Putin himself, who addressed the nation from an empty Red Square and laid flowers on plaques commemorating each of the 12 Soviet Hero Cities from the Second World War.

The experience in neighboring Belarus, however, was very different. There, the government of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko staged the only Victory Day parade in the entire former USSR in the country's capital city of Minsk. (London *Guardian*, May 9, 2020)

FREEDOMS LOST, FREEDOMS GAINED

Russia's federally mandated "non-working" period ended on May 12th, shifting the decision to reopen nonessential businesses to regional governors across the country. In his televised address, President Putin credited his government's ability to raise hospital bed capacity for saving lives in the country. Despite the change, other measures remain in place, including bans on mass gatherings and promises of bonus pay for frontline doctors and first responders. Additional precautions are now being taken at the local level, with major cities in Russia extending their current lockdowns until the end of the month and citizens who are permitted to move about required to do so in masks. (*The Moscow Times*, May 11, 2020)

THE PROBLEMS WITH RUSSIAN AID

The coronavirus aid that was donated by Russia to the United States in early April was controversial from the start. Initially mischaracterized by Russian state media as a humanitarian gift, the erroneous description forced the U.S. State Department to clarify that the assistance being rendered by the Russian government was in fact fulfillment of a purchase. Now, the Russian goods themselves have become a matter of controversy. Of the 45 Russian ventilators provided to New York City, 15 turned out to be of the *Aventa-M* model, which has since been recalled in Russia after having malfunctioned and caused fires at two separate hospitals. As a result, none of the provided ventilators have been used and they are currently sitting in a FEMA warehouse "out of an abundance of caution." Additionally, the providers of the equipment, the Russian Direct Investment Fund and ROSTEC, a state conglomerate that also manages military technology manufacturing, have been under sanctions by the U.S. Treasury Department since 2015, making the aid questionable in nature. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 13, 2020)