

PARALLELS

Putin, Trump, and the Pandemic

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COVID-19 is upending the political strategies of both Trump and Putin—and could endanger both leaders' grip on power.

As COVID-19 continues to claim lives and roil markets, it is also transforming political fortunes—not least those of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. Both have faced blistering criticism for their oversight—or lack thereof—of the pandemic response in their countries. Both have doubled down on longstanding habits of deflection and delegation that are ill-suited for coping with a global pandemic. And both might discover that the coronavirus crisis will affect their ability to stay in power.

Putin's Best Laid Plans

April 22 was supposed to be a big day for Putin. It was today that Russians were supposed to have voted for a major change in their country's constitution to allow Putin to run again for President after his current term expires in 2024. May 9 was set to be another important milestone for the Russian leader, who had planned elaborate ceremonies to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II.

Instead, the pandemic forced him to postpone both the April 22 vote and the May 9 festivities. Even before the virus hit Russia in a serious way, Putin was struggling to muster support for his plan to stay in office for another decade or more. According to one pre-pandemic poll by the Levada Center, Putin did not have majority support among the overall population for extending his stay in the presidency: 48 percent of Russians surveyed approved of the amendment to erase presidential term limits for Putin, while 47 percent disapproved. While another Levada poll released the same day showed that 52 percent of those planning to vote supported the change, versus 28 percent opposed it, a bare majority is never enough for an authoritarian leader like Putin who seeks overwhelming endorsement.

Russia has not conducted a free and fair vote in many years, and Putin will surely resort to his usual fraud and vote-rigging to secure the necessary sizable majority. But as the pandemic worsens in Russia, and if Putin gets blamed for an inadequate response, he will have less room politically to engage in electoral manipulation. That means vote-rigging in a rescheduled plebiscite could trigger protests the likes of which Russia has not seen since 2011-2012.

Staying in power is Putin's number one objective, in order to protect his assets, accumulated over decades of corruption. At the same time, Putin's inept leadership has made achieving this goal more difficult. He has squandered two decades in power by failing to diversify Russia's economy from its dependence on oil and gas while significantly increasing the state's role in the economy. He has incurred serious sanctions from the West. He has no plans for righting Russia's teetering economy, which has been stagnant since the drop in the price of oil—now plummeting to new depths—and his invasion of Ukraine, a situation now made much worse by the pandemic. (Some predict a fourfold rise in unemployment, to roughly 11 percent of the workforce.)

Under Putin, Russia has also seen relations with many of its neighbors deteriorate significantly. In a major change from just seven years ago, a majority of Ukrainians support joining NATO thanks to Putin's invasion, and view Putin's Russia as a major threat. Many Belarusians have protested against Russian efforts to subsume their country under a Russian-controlled union state. Many Georgians despise Putin for his occupation of 20 percent of their territory.

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Putin wanted to ram through his constitutional changes now, because the passage of time is likely to make the situation less controllable for him. While Putin's ratings soared after his illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas, that boost in the polls has worn off as Russians have grown weary of his overseas adventures. A March poll by the Levada Center gave Putin a rating of 63 percent—an enviable score by Western standards, to be sure, but one approaching his 2013 low of 61 percent. More concerning for Putin was yet another poll by Levada showing that people's trust in him personally had dropped from 59 percent in November 2017 to 35 percent this past January.

To some in Russia, Putin has restored the country to great power status, and made the economy rebound from its nadir in the 1990s. The speaker of the Russian Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, in pressing for passage of Putin's constitutional reforms, recently quipped, "Today, given the challenges and threats that exist in the world, oil and gas are not our advantages," he said. "As you can see, both oil and gas can fall in price. Our advantage is Putin, and we must protect him." In the past, Volodin has made similarly slavish claims; in 2014, he said, "There is no Russia today if there is no Putin."

To more clear-eyed observers, however, Putin is known for aligning Russia with fellow brutal authoritarian leaders in Syria and Venezuela. His interest is in staying in power and enriching himself, not looking out for the interests of the population. The pandemic is sure to heighten this perception among Russians. Why, Russians might ask, are we sending forces and providing money to prop up leaders like Assad and Maduro?

Putin has made a big deal during the pandemic of Russian assistance to countries like Italy, Serbia, and even the United States. Putin's propaganda stunts are likely to backfire, however, as Russia itself experiences shortages of needed medical supplies in many cities and towns. Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny summed up the sentiments of many on Twitter: "Doctors and nurses in the whole country are sitting without masks and getting each other sick. This is monstrous. Putin is crazy."

Unlike Trump, Putin does not hold daily press briefings. In fact, the Russian government provides little news and information to a population hungering for it. Instead, local officials have stepped in to fill the void. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin has risen to the occasion, enforcing stringent measures that essentially have locked down the capital city. As Putin retreated to his country estate, the head of Russia's coronavirus task force, Tatyana Golikova, assured Putin in mid-March that "there is no reason at all to panic," while Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov was pooh-poohing the threat, telling reporters as late as March "There is *de facto* no epidemic" in Russia. It was left to Sobyenin and others to sound the alarm. That hasn't stopped Putin from

criticizing local leaders, however. “This reserve (of time) can melt quickly, it must not be spent thoughtlessly, it must be used in the most efficient way,” Putin scolded regional officials in a televised meeting held by video link.

Putin has a history of disappearing from the public scene when times are tough—after the sinking of the Kursk submarine in August 2000, for instance, and following the assassination of Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in February 2015. For an authoritarian leader who has decisively concentrated power in his hands, Putin can also be very indecisive at times; the pandemic is only the most recent example. The question is whether his handling of the crisis will wound him mortally. “The situation is under full control,” Putin claimed April 19 as the number of cases in Russia skyrocketed, a claim reminiscent of reassurances by Trump and others in his administration during the early days of the U.S. outbreak that proved to be wildly inaccurate. “All of our society is united in front of the common threat,” Putin added.

Trump’s Re-Election Prospects

When 2020 started, Trump was feeling good about his re-election chances. And after his impeachment acquittal, he was left riding an economic wave with very low unemployment and a booming stock market. He relished the prospect of facing off against either Senator Elizabeth Warren or Senator Bernie Sanders. Former Vice President Joe Biden looked like a badly wounded candidate on his last legs.

Come November, however, Trump will indeed square off against Biden, who does well in most polls against Trump. The American economy, Trump’s top talking point, has plummeted as a result of the shutdown. Unemployment has surged past 22 million in just one month, and the stock market, with big ups and downs, is not where Trump hoped it would be. Reopening undoubtedly will boost the economy, but doing so prematurely could come at a huge cost in lives.

At the outset of the pandemic, Trump got a momentary bump in the polls, as most presidents do during times of crisis, but even then he could not consistently reach 50 percent support. More recent polls show his numbers dropping. In fact, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey, “Trump’s overall job rating has changed little since late March (March 19-24) Currently, 44% approve of the way Trump is handling his job as president, while 53% disapprove.” That figure, Pew notes, is “among the highest ratings of his presidency”—which does not bode well for Trump come November. Another poll by the Washington Post and University of Maryland showed 54 percent of those surveyed giving Trump negative marks for his handling of the crisis.

In contrast to Putin, who has taken a very low-key approach in handling the crisis, Trump is a never-ending presence. After more than a month of suggesting the pandemic was inconsequential, his daily White House press briefings with claims of “total authority” feed the image of him as a wannabe strongman. So, too, do statements like this one from April 13: “The President of the United States calls the shots,” and governors “can’t do anything without the approval of the president.” Despite such imperious assertions, Trump has refused to use the Defense Production Act to its fullest capacity and has deferred most decisions to the governors, hoping to absolve himself of both responsibility and blame, should it come. Avoiding

responsibility and refusing to take tough decisions are traits Trump and Putin have in common, as the Russian leader also has deferred to local authorities on major decisions.

Trump, consistent with his “America First” strategy, has offered little help to other countries in need during the pandemic and has even tried to block shipments destined for other countries and reroute them stateside. One exception, however, has become fodder for the Democrats. Trump allowed medical supplies to be shipped to China, despite the shortage of such supplies in the United States and the fact that China has been the target of well-deserved criticism for its cover-up of the crisis in Wuhan. Trump also has offered to provide ventilators to Russia—“they’re having a hard time in Moscow. We’re going to help them,” he said—an offer the Russians have described as “kind.”

All of this will complicate Trump’s re-election prospects. In contrast to Russia’s pre-determined elections, those in the United States can produce surprising results, as evidenced by Trump’s own victory in 2016. Trump’s support for conservative lawmakers’ efforts to suppress voter turnout and opposition to mail-in voting suggest, however, he wants to do whatever he can to ensure victory again.

Fears that he may face legal challenges and/or criminal charges the day he leaves the White House may give Trump additional incentive to tilt the election process in his favor. As he did in 2016, when he refused to say whether he would accept defeat at the polls, Trump is already raising questions about the legitimacy of this year’s election.

Grading Putin and Trump

Compared to leaders of countries like Germany, South Korea and Taiwan, both Putin and Trump have been widely criticized for how they have handled the pandemic. Both sought to downplay the severity of the crisis in its early days. Trump did not want to spook the markets and risk harming the economy. Putin was intent on holding his April 22 vote and May 9 Victory Day ceremony. Neither was interested in sounding the alarm early on for fear of upsetting the apple cart.

After instituting a partial travel ban on foreign nationals coming from China in late January, Trump squandered the month of February when he could have mobilized the full forces of the U.S. government to prepare for an outbreak. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (65 percent) say Trump was “too slow to take major steps to address the threat...when cases of the disease were first reported in other countries,” according to a Pew Research survey.

A recent poll by the University of North Florida showed 53 percent of Floridians disapproving of Trump’s handling of the crisis and 58 percent said they do not trust the President “to provide reliable information about the coronavirus;” only 41 percent said they did. Such results suggest that when it comes to life-and-death issues, Americans want to turn to a trusted source—and Trump, with his campaign rally-like press briefings, is not that source.

Trump’s claim that he “takes no responsibility at all” for any mistakes in responding to the crisis is not unlike Putin’s hands-off approach. In the United States, we have seen many governors and

local leaders rise to the occasion in response to the crisis. In determining when and how to “reopen” the economy, Trump has punted those decisions to the governors.

Putin, who did virtually nothing to prepare Russia for an outbreak even as the rest of the world was experiencing one, initially wanted to convey the image that everything in Russia was under control, and his grip on most news outlets enables him to perpetuate Kremlin lies. Even so, a recent poll by the Levada Center found that 24 percent completely distrust the official information about the coronavirus situation that is disseminated in the media, and 35 percent only partially trust it.

Both Trump and Putin have demonstrated little empathy for those suffering from the pandemic. Putin’s lack of compassion has been a trademark for years. When asked by Larry King about what happened to the Kursk submarine in 2000, Putin callously said, “It sank,” offering no words of condolence for the families of the 118 sailors who perished. In the United States, Americans expect their President to relate to the pain that they are feeling. When asked weeks ago by a reporter what he would say to those suffering from the virus, Trump instead launched into an attack on the reporter, Peter Alexander of NBC News. That may play well to his base, but it is unlikely to win over others.

The approaches adopted by Trump and Putin initially did not prevent the very outcomes they feared—panicked markets, a declining economy, and canceled events. As commentator Maksim Trudolyubov put it, “For once, Vladimir Putin followed in the path of his American counterpart, President Trump, and with similar results—a greater risk of catastrophe that might have been avoided.” They both failed to take necessary measures to prepare for a major outbreak. The resulting toll—medically and financially—on people in both Russia and the United States is bound to damage the standing of both leaders.

Putin cannot ignore popular sentiment, even if the bubble in which he lives largely disconnects him from it. He was spooked by the “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, the Arab Spring movement in 2011, and the second revolution in Ukraine in 2014. He blamed the United States for fomenting them and feared that Russia was next on the list. Massive protests over his handling of the pandemic would scare Putin all over again, though assembling for demonstrations in Russia, already significantly constricted before the pandemic, is even more difficult to do now amid fear of contagion.

Whereas Putin fears mobilization of the population, Trump appeals to the mob to “liberate” various states from stringent shutdown measures. His tweets target mostly Democratic governors in states like Michigan, Minnesota, and Virginia. Leaving aside the public health concerns when many protestors show up without masks in close proximity, Trump is playing with fire by inciting crowds to turn against their state and local leaders. Instead of promoting unity at a time of major crisis, Trump is turning to ugly populist appeals that could spin out of control and lead to violence.

Putin and Trump: Friends in Need...

Amid the raging pandemic, Trump praised Putin for the Russian leader’s shipment of medical supplies to New York. “Russia sent us a very, very large planeload of things, medical equipment,

which was very nice,” Trump said March 30. Oblivious to the points Putin was trying to score in sending such aid, Trump added, “I’m not concerned about Russian propaganda.”

At the same time that Putin was sending a planeload of dubious assistance to New York, his henchmen were launching a vigorous disinformation campaign suggesting that the United States was responsible for the pandemic and that American servicemen in Lithuania were spreading the virus. Consistent with the Kremlin’s years-long disinformation campaign, pro-Putin Russian media ridiculed the lack of personal protective equipment in the United States, the need for help from Russia, and the chaos in many American hospitals. None of this seems to have bothered Trump, nor has Russian criticism of Trump’s decision to suspend funding for the World Health Organization.

Meanwhile, Putin has sustained and in some cases increased his other nefarious activities despite the pandemic. In recent days Putin has bolstered mercenary forces in Libya, maintained support for Assad, signaled continuing support for Maduro, sustained his campaign against Ukraine, and pushed the demarcation line further into Georgian territory. The latter issue reached the point where the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi issued a statement condemning Russia’s aggressive ‘borderization’ actions along the boundary line of South Ossetia: “We condemn any actions by the de facto authorities in Tskhinvali that aggravate tensions and distract from urgent efforts to safeguard the lives and health of the affected populations, particularly . . . against the backdrop of the global pandemic crisis.”

In short, the Putin regime continues to threaten U.S. interests even as the pandemic itself threatens Putin’s own legitimacy. In March, Putin sought to hurt American shale-oil production by launching a price war with Saudi Arabia to undermine U.S. energy independence and exports to Europe. Oil and gas constitute more than half of Russia’s exports and roughly one third of its GDP, and the coronavirus pandemic is driving down demand. This could leave Russia with an enormous glut, forcing it to temporarily shut down some of its energy fields.

Since the price war, Russia did help negotiate an “OPEC Plus” deal to cut output and stabilize oil prices—hashed out in numerous phone conversations between Trump and Putin, as the *Washington Post*’s David Ignatius reported earlier this month. But this has hardly resolved the matter, with oil prices tumbling to record lows this week. While the oil shock will disadvantage Russia as well as the United States, it should also remind Washington that Moscow’s “cooperation” in the energy sector is neither well-intentioned nor effective.

A report by Russia’s TASS news agency claimed that the two leaders did not discuss sanctions during their phone calls. That is hard to believe, since Putin has made lifting sanctions during the pandemic a major topic in G-20 discussions, the United Nations and elsewhere. He and Trump face two problems in this regard, however. First, sanctions do not apply to humanitarian needs; second, the American President does not have the authority, under legislation passed by Congress in 2017, to lift sanctions on his own without congressional approval. So even were Trump eager to accommodate Putin, in fact, thankfully, he can’t.

The two leaders presumably discussed cooperation in dealing with the pandemic, and they also might have broached the issue of arms control. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov renewed Russia’s interest in arms control discussions, but Trump has indicated he wants China to be part

of any new arms control initiatives; Beijing has firmly rejected such notions. Thus, one should not expect any breakthroughs in this area.

Finally, it is easy to imagine that during their phone conversations, the two leaders might have taken a few moments to commiserate about the turn in their respective political fortunes. There is little, however, that either can do to help the other politically. Trump cannot unilaterally lift sanctions on Russia, nor do the symbolic favor of attending the now-cancelled May 9 ceremony. Even a Putin offer to interfere in the election again in favor of Trump could backfire. Given Putin's track record in consolidating power, it would be unwise to bet against him muddling through, and Trump should never be underestimated. That said, one cannot help but wonder whether political changes may be coming in Washington or Moscow—or both—come 2021.

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