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Russia after the Coronavirus Crisis

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President Vladimir Putin does not need to define himself to the Russian people. After 20 years in power, they know who he is. His present challenge is to preserve his regime and, if he can, to transform the coronavirus crisis into an opportunity. He must do so in a paradoxical political environment, which is enabling new forms of government control and at the same time placing enormous strain on governments of all kinds—not least on authoritarian ones with state-capacity problems like Russia's.

In this environment, U.S. policy toward Russia is unlikely to change drastically, even if President Donald Trump loses the election this November. And the immediate effects of the coronavirus crisis will not alter the substantive problems weighing down the U.S.-Russian relationship, which emanate from contradictory visions of Europe's security architecture. The impasse at which Moscow, Brussels, and Washington have arrived is entrenched by now, which could make it more difficult to deal with coronavirus-related surprises in the future.

One such surprise has already materialized. In part because of his dishonest and incompetent response to the pandemic, Belarus's President Alexander Lukashenko finds himself facing a revolution after 26 years of widening and uninterrupted dictatorship.

Russia is not Belarus, however. Its government has greater legitimacy. This derives from the middle-class economic growth that marked Putin's early years as president (2000–2008), from a desire for stability after a century of violent upheaval, and from a national sensibility that reflects Russian civilization and the traditional aspirations of Russian foreign policy. From the beginning, Putin has been alert to these aspects of his government's legitimacy. They were on display in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, and they still furnish a degree of political insulation for him today.

Nevertheless, Putin is struggling to apply his old formulas. He fumbled the response to the pandemic by playing it down at the beginning and then by reacting slowly. He has placed the basic competence of his government in doubt. The Russian economy has also been deteriorating since he returned to the presidency in 2012 (after Dmitry Medvedev's four years in the office). This is not a foreign-policy crisis in which Russia can force others to react (as he does in Ukraine and Syria). He is contending with a domestic reality that he

must react to concretely address. No amount of media messaging and propaganda can undo Russia's current economic and public-health woes. Nevertheless, Putin, and others highly invested in the regime's survival, can try to suppress dissent by tightening the screws in severe ways, as is likely with the recent Novichok poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, but this can easily backfire.

In recent months, Russia witnessed prolonged protests in its Far East. Protestors expressed concern over the country's economic future and anger at the Kremlin's arbitrary power. Putin faces the authoritarian's dilemma: repression does not solve underlying problems and is likely to make them worse. In the wake of Navalny's poisoning, protests so far have been moderate and local. Moscow and Saint Petersburg are quiet, but Russians in Khabarovsk have again taken to the streets. Any crackdown within Russia's borders could compound Putin's troubles abroad. As a result of the Navalny poisoning, political tensions with one of Russia's more important trade partners—Germany—are reaching new heights. Nordstream II may become a casualty of Putin's domestic political style.

Pressures on Putin's Foreign Policy

Developments in Russia are intertwined with the Kremlin's foreign policy. Putin is not operating in a vacuum. Russian domestic politics in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic will dictate three constraints on foreign policy going forward, which taken together are somewhat contradictory.

First, Putin must avoid financially costly moves. He has already tipped his regime too far toward guns in the guns-versus-butter equation. At 3.9 percent of GDP, Russia's military spending is proportionally higher than in Western Europe (the United States spends 3.2 percent of its GDP on defense.) Capitalizing on his modernized military, Putin has expanded the scope of foreign policy and military involvement to include Russia's "near abroad," the Middle East and Latin America. Mission creep in any of these regions could evoke the Afghanistan Syndrome, a drain on the treasury when demand for government services (public health especially) at home is growing.

Second, the regime cannot appear weak. One could call this the Gorbachev or the Yeltsin Syndrome. Putin will not win plaudits in Russia by conceding to the West on Syria, Ukraine, or Belarus. He needs to show that the country's great-power status is not fleeting, which is demonstrated by his willingness to say "no" to the West. He must be seen to sustain Russia's place in the world; for example, by serving as an arbiter of Belarus's destiny and not as a passive observer. It is at any rate a role that Putin gladly plays on the global stage. Yet, it is risky for Moscow to scale up its engagement abroad or military posture. Domestic dissatisfaction with the government's response to the pandemic, worry about Russia's economic future, and perceptions of Putin's arbitrary hold on power simultaneously create significant risk for initiating further military action.

Third, to preserve his regime, Putin cannot allow authoritarian governance to be perceived as lacking. China will be an ally in this endeavor, drawing the two countries closer together. Belarus stands as the most recent cautionary example. Russian news media has dramatized the inadequate performance of the United States on the coronavirus challenge, painting a picture that liberal democracies are no better—and possibly worse—than autocracies on public health. In this regard, Russia's rush to approve and disseminate its "Sputnik" coronavirus vaccine dovetails with the aim to be strong geopolitically, while attempting to demonstrate the government's ability to address domestic health-security concerns. For Putin, color revolutions spurred by the pandemic are

no less a nightmare than color revolutions generated by the attractions of the Western model. Hence, where the West is portrayed as failing Russia is supposed to be succeeding.

Further Drift in Russia-West Relations

As far as Russia is concerned, the coronavirus pandemic has little potential to create opportunities to work with Europe or the United States. Relations are too strained for there to be meaningful public-health cooperation, and Russia is at any rate putting its vaccine to geopolitical use, underscoring its competitive attitude toward the West. Europe and the United States have not plugged the coronavirus crisis into their competition with Russia, but they are also distracted and beset by domestic political challenges, making foreign policy less of a priority. And, where foreign policy bandwidth exists, it has been consumed by China. Consequently, the pandemic and its knock-on effects could contribute to drift and inertia in the West's strategic approach to Russia.

Drift and inertia are not necessarily bad. There is no magic solution to the West's Russia troubles. Trust is far too low for diplomatic breakthroughs. No evidence exists to suggest that Putin wants one anyway or a normalization of relations with the West. Drift and inertia can be indistinguishable from "strategic patience," and the best thing the West can do vis-à-vis Russia is to cultivate positive long-term relations with the Russian people, breaking down the "us and them" rhetoric and encouraging people-to-people contacts. The summer of 2020 has shown the fragility of authoritarian rule in Belarus and in Russia alike. In the long run, people matter more than governments. Putinism will not last forever.

On the other hand, the short-term risks are serious. The coronavirus crisis is an inevitably disruptive force. No doubt Putin is more insecure in 2020 than he was a year ago, while Lukashenko's days are likely numbered. So far, Russia and the West have been more rhetorically cautious in their reaction to what is happening Belarus than they were six years ago in the case of Ukraine. Even though Lukashenko has tried to blame Poland and NATO for the protests against his rule, Euro-Atlantic integration has not featured in the surrounding narrative. There is no EU Association Agreement in the background, as there was in Ukraine. And the integration of the Belarusian military into the Russian military—as well as the events surrounding the two crises—makes it hard to compare Belarus with Ukraine.

Russia will not let Belarus slip away, and the West does not have much leverage beyond the moral support it is lending to the Belarusian opposition. If the situation turns chaotic, Russia will be tempted to apply its military tools to ensure the political outcome it wants. An intensification of its military presence in Belarus would spook Poland and Lithuania, bordering NATO member states that have been pushing for Lukashenko's departure from office. Would Germany, France, the EU, and the United States follow their lead? Given a non-existent diplomatic relationship between Russia and the West, the relevant choices would either be extreme economic sanctions (including removal of Russian banks from the SWIFT system) or military measures, such as an enhanced NATO presence on the border of Belarus. It all amounts to another sobering fact of the coronavirus era. Cooperation has become yet more tenuous and the aura of crisis more acute.

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