

SECURITY INSIGHTS



COVID-19, Russian Responses, and President Putin's Operational Code *By Graeme P. Herd*

Executive Summary

- As of April 12, 2020, the number of those infected nationwide had risen to 15,770 and the total number of deaths in Russia stood at 130. More than 1.2 million COVID-19 tests had been performed, according to consumer watchdog Rospotrebnadzor.¹ The course and consequences of COVID-19 in Russia raise pertinent questions: What would change if Putin remained in office and what would remain if Putin left? Do we have a “Putin problem” or a “Russia problem?” To address these questions, we turn to Putin’s operational code and find the role and function of ambiguity and the U.S. as Russia’s strategic benchmark are particularly intriguing.
- Russia’s likely “muddle through” approach to COVID-19 will compromise Putin’s political authority and tarnish his reputation as a skilled crisis manager. President Putin is caught by a paradox: the longer he waits to front the crisis, the worse the pandemic impacts the public, and the harder it is for him to take control, as the more his insertion into the crisis raises questions about his leadership performance, threat assessments, and overall decision-making competence.
- The consequences of COVID-19 on President Putin’s operational code will be two-fold. First, Putin’s threat assessment will be further distorted as he exaggerates both Western weakness and Russia’s strengths. Second, Putin will want to restore his aura. If we combine both impulses, it is likely that Putin’s post-COVID-19 decision-making will be more volatile and less risk averse.

Introduction

Russian security doctrines have highlighted the threat of a pandemic as very real. At the same time, official narratives generated by Russia’s state-controlled media strive to convince the populace that President Putin exemplifies the multiple leadership virtues of effective centralized

¹ Report: “Coronavirus in Russia,” April 12, 2020, BBC Monitoring, accessed April 12, 2020.

states: Putin has the “strong hand” and “iron will” that allow him to take necessary but unpopular decisions for the good of the state. President Putin is the custodian of stability and curator of order, for without Putin there can be no Russia.

COVID-19 stress-tests this proposition as this pandemic acts like an X-ray. Before COVID-19, Putin and stability were immutable reinforcing values but this proposition challenges Putin’s performance legitimacy. For President Putin, COVID-19 is perplexing; the virus not susceptible to Putin’s tried and tested “active measures” or a “cunning plan” and it cannot be addressed through the lens of secretive, swift, and spectacular (stage-managed and theatrical) special operations. It does not follow political calendars, adhere to state borders, or have an ego that can be intimidated or manipulated by a trained case officer. As such, the COVID-19 crisis poses a unique challenge for President Putin. Moreover, its effects are compounded by an oil price slump and potential global recession, if not depression.

Russia’s response to this health crisis will reveal the nature of the political regime, its social contract with its population, and strategic decision-making in Russia. An effective response will bolster Putin’s reputation and support, bolster constitutional reform, and pave the way to Putin and Putinism dominating the political landscape through to 2036. A protracted socio-economic crisis marked by mismanagement, however, will undermine Putin and his support; Putin himself may come to be widely perceived as the core threat to stability, leaving Russians with a choice between an unstable Putin or post-Putin stability.²

Official Rhetoric and Reality

Through early and mid-March 2020, one theme consistently pushed by Russia’s state-controlled media was that Russia had not only many fewer cases of COVID-19 than the U.S., but that the U.S. has fewer medical personnel and facilities than Russia per 1,000 people. The core message was that the virus was generally under control in Russia thanks to its efficient response system. The World Health Organization’s (WHO) representative in Russia, Melita Vujnovic, praised Russian coronavirus preparedness measures, which had effectively “forestalled” a wider outbreak.³ Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko stated that several state agencies are working on developing a vaccine against the COVID-19 coronavirus within five or six months. These agencies include consumer watchdog *Rospotrebnadzor*, the Federal Medical and Biological Agency (FMBA), and private pharmaceutical companies. On March 26, 2020, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated, “Discussions about eventualities are not in this case appropriate. I would like to remind you of one thing: de-facto, we do not have an epidemic.”⁴

Popular anti-Western talk show hosts pushed key messages: Russians are protected while medieval, plague-ridden Europe was in panic and on the point of collapse, chaos, or worse; risks come from abroad; Euro-Atlantic relations drove Europe into a “coronavirus dead end”; and the liberal model of globalization is failing. Russia’s self-reliant “besieged fortress” strategy was succeeding and Russia’s worldview was vindicated.

² Andrey Pertsev, “Unstable Putin,” *The Moscow Times*, April 1, 2020.

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/02/putin-the-unstable-a69837>, accessed April 10, 2020.

³ TASS News Agency, Moscow, in Russian, 1200 GMT, March 26, 2020. Unless otherwise stated, all foreign language sources in this article were accessed through the BBC Monitoring database.

⁴ Interfax News Agency, Moscow, in Russian, 0946 and 0945 GMT, March 26, 2020.

In reality, the low numbers of reported cases in March likely reflected limited high-quality testing coupled with a large backlog, as Russia's only COVID-19 testing center (State Research Center of Virology and Biotechnology VECTOR) was located in Novosibirsk. Misdiagnosis of COVID-19 was also a factor. Spikes in deaths were attributed to unseasonably high "pneumonia" rates. On March 16, 2020, Russia's Digital Development Ministry created a website, Stopcoronavirus.rf, to provide information to Russians about the virus, but its posts were judged to be ambiguous, vague, and in some cases consisted of incorrect information.⁵ *Meduza*, a Riga-based independent newspaper, asked Russian medical professionals to contact them about case load and supply conditions in Russian hospitals. From the 500 responses from around Russia, they contacted more than thirty, including "doctors, among them infectious disease specialists, as well as other medical personnel such as nurses and technicians." The majority spoke of severe obstacles and shortages of everything.⁶

This reality was presented to President Putin on March 24, 2020. Sergey Sobyenin, Moscow's Mayor and Putin's trusted former chief-of-staff, was televised warning Putin, "The growth is high; a serious situation is developing" and that "no one on earth knows the real picture."⁷ In President Putin's address to the nation on the coronavirus epidemic on March 25, 2020, the President realistically acknowledged, "we have to realize that Russia—owing to its geographic position if nothing else—cannot shield itself against this threat. Next to our borders are countries which have already been seriously affected by the epidemic and it is objectively impossible to fully block it from entering our country." President Putin announced a one-week "paid leave" between Sunday, March 28 and Saturday, April 5, 2020.⁸

On March 29, Mayor Sobyenin reported, "The spread of the coronavirus has entered a new phase. Over 1,000 cases of infection have been detected in Moscow. Nobody is safe."⁹ President Putin, in his second COVID-19 address to the nation on April 2, announced that this "paid leave" was to be extended to April 30. Aside from "paid leave" to encourage social distancing, other mitigation measures were put into effect. All overseas flights were halted, entertainment venues were closed, and civil servants were ordered to work from home. Efforts were also made to remind older Muscovites to self-isolate. The Moscow metro administration used stickers to temporarily rename two stations, *Domodedovo* and *Babushkinskaya*, into *DomaDedovskaya* and *DomaBabushkinskaya*. The new names play on the words *Doma* ("at home"), *Ded* ("Grandpa") and *Babushka* ("Grandma").¹⁰

⁵ "Russian government releases official coronavirus website with multiple errors and internal contradictions," *Meduza*, March 24, 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/03/25/russian-government-releases-official-coronavirus-website-with-multiple-errors-and-internal-contradictions>, accessed April 10, 2020.

⁶ "'There's a shortage of absolutely everything': Russian doctors describe the beginning of their coronavirus pandemic from the front lines," *Meduza*, March 31, 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/03/31/there-s-a-shortage-of-absolutely-everything>, accessed April 10, 2020.

⁷ Andrew Roth, "Russian Official Questions Putin over Coronavirus," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/russian-official-questions-putin-over-coronavirus>, accessed April 10, 2020.

⁸ "Text of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Address to the Nation on the Coronavirus Epidemic," shown on state-run Rossiya 1 TV, at 1320 GMT on March 25, 2020.

⁹ *RIA Novosti*, Moscow, in Russian, 0810 GMT, March 29, 2020.

¹⁰ Report: "Coronavirus in Russia: 29 March 2020," BBC Monitoring in Russian, 1500 GMT, March 29, 2020.

Domestic Policy Consequences: Economic, Political, and Military

Official exhortation to demonstrate discipline and solidarity were accompanied by limited economic state help. On March 25, Putin offered financial support to young families, workers, and small business owners. Although President Putin announced a six-month tax holiday to support small- and medium-size businesses (SME's) affected by the pandemic to prevent unemployment, the SME's are expected to continue to pay salaries through April 30, 2020. While popular talk shows discussed the virtues of "squeezing the offshore aristocracy," Sergei Aleksashenko, a former deputy central bank chairman, noted that in raising taxes on the wealthy, "Putin wants to extend his personal control over Russian business and its resources," given that the taxes will provide a "minuscule" boost for the budget.¹¹ Nonetheless, responses to the 1998 economic meltdown, the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-09, and the post-Crimea annexation slump in 2014-15 have been repeated in 2020. In each case, the approach was to preserve macro-economic stability by pushing the costs of the economic downturn onto the population. However, in 2020 the costs of goods are increasing as inflation rises. Real-term Russian wages have decreased continuously since 2012. The Russian Chamber of Commerce reports that three million Russian SME's may go under, with a resultant 8.6 million job losses.¹² The ruble exchange rate with the dollar could nudge 90 rubles to the dollar as oil production slows. It is certainly too early to know if this Kremlin playbook can avoid political costs.

In terms of domestic political consequences of COVID-19, President Putin was forced to postpone the April 22 "All Russia vote" on constitutional amendments. This postponement indicates Putin calculates that the risk to the regime if there is a delay in changing the Constitution to allow him to run for two more terms in 2024 did not outweigh the obvious risk to the population—the five million votes in Moscow and seventy million throughout the country—had the vote gone ahead. As Putin stated, "the health, lives and safety of people is an absolute priority for us."¹³

Rhetoric aside, the delay does have potential positive consequences from President Putin's perspective. As the Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Research (ISEPR) foundation head Dmitry Badovsky notes, the delayed vote will take place "just in the wake of feelings of victory, of overcoming the threat. People will heave a sigh of relief, social sentiments may get stronger, and in these circumstances, the vote may be quite successful."¹⁴ The delay allows Putin to build up support for the amendments. Cynics might note that the delay also opens up the possibility for simultaneous snap State *Duma* (parliamentary) elections, presenting potential efficiencies in terms of vote choice and turn-out falsification, especially if Moscow, with its high levels of Internet access, opts for on-line voting.

The head of the Russian Investigations Committee (SKR), Alexander Bastrykin, has issued instructions to set up a working group to identify "false information on the Internet about the spread of coronavirus in the country." SKR spokeswoman Svetlana Petrenko noted that this

¹¹ Todd Prince, "Putin's Pretext? COVID-19 Crisis Tapped To Tax Rich Russians' Offshore Wealth," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-s-pretext-covid-19-crisis-tapped-to-tax-rich-russians-offshore-wealth/30513483.html>, accessed April 10, 2020.

¹² Inna Degotkova, "Number of Russians to Lose Their Jobs Due to Coronavirus Announced. Three Million Companies Are at Risk of Closure," *MK* (Moskovsky Komsomolets website), Moscow, in Russian, March 23, 2020.

¹³ "Text of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Address to the Nation on the Coronavirus Epidemic."

¹⁴ Round up: "Russian press focuses on Putin's 'personal war' against Covid," BBC Monitoring in Russian, 0100 GMT, March 26, 2020.

group will work to “identify facts of dissemination, including on the Internet and instant messengers, of knowingly false and unverified information about the number of patients with Covid-19 coronavirus in Russia, as well as other false information contributing to panic.”¹⁵

Moscow is heavily reliant on facial recognition and other tracking technologies to enforce the lockdown, generating fears in opposition quarters that the surveillance measures may be made permanent and result in a “digital dictatorship.” Leonid Volkov, a key associate of Russia’s most prominent anti-Putin campaigner, Alexei Navalny, wrote on Facebook: “What the Moscow mayor’s office is doing is no quarantine; it’s a digital concentration camp... The coronavirus will eventually leave, but this digital concentration camp will, of course, remain.”¹⁶

On March 31, 2020, President Putin signed a decree ordering that Russian Armed Forces begin their spring conscription session on April 1, running to 15 July, despite the pandemic. Some 135,000 recruits aged 18 to 27 are expected to join: “Recruitment offices and rally points have received all necessary directives. Military medical commissions have been reinforced with specialists and are being additionally supplied.”¹⁷ However, *Krasnaya Zvezda* (“Red Star”), citing an interview with Col-Gen Yevgeny Burdinsky, chief of the Main Organization and Mobilization Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces General Staff, announced an abrupt U-turn on April 1, 2020: “The schedule for the beginning of conscription commissions’ work and the dates for sending new recruits to the troops have been adjusted in connection with the coronavirus pandemic. The Defense Ministry has now taken the decision that the first conscripts will be deployed to their places of service not earlier than 20 May.”¹⁸ Defense Minister Shoigu claims that there are no cases of COVID-19 reported in the Russian military and that stringent measures have been implemented.

It is still expected that the May 9 Victory Day parade will go ahead, unless the situation is catastrophic; if Stalin could hold a parade on November 7, 1941, when the enemy was at the gates of Moscow, the reasoning is, then so too can the Russian military in 2020, on the 75th anniversary of victory. The impossibility of practicing physical distancing while troops rehearse for the event raises the danger of combat capability degradation. Indeed, Alexander Staver, analyst for military news website *Voyennoye Obozreniye* (“Military Review”), stated

Military crews are the perfect environment for the spread of the virus. A large number of people concentrated in one place does not facilitate limited contacts. Can you imagine what would happen if the coronavirus gets into a restricted facility of, for instance, the Aerospace Forces? Or a unit controlling intercontinental ballistic missiles?¹⁹

Foreign Policy Consequences

For Russia, the first negative foreign policy impact was with its closest “strategic partner,” China. On January 31, 2019, President Putin ordered the closure of all sixteen legal crossings on the Chinese border. This highlighted the lack of trust in China’s official information and exposed the degree of Russian economic dependence on Chinese markets. However, ill feeling was

¹⁵ Report: “Coronavirus in Russia,” BBC Monitoring, March 26, 2020.

¹⁶ Explainer: “Moscow’s Covid-19 surveillance plans,” BBC Monitoring, in English, April 1, 2020.

¹⁷ Explainer: “How is Covid-19 Affecting the Russian Military?” BBC Monitoring, April 1, 2020.

¹⁸ Insight: “Coronavirus in Russia,” BBC Monitoring, April 1, 2020.

¹⁹ Ibid.

largely overcome after a Putin-Xi discussion. Both states have a joint interest in framing the U.S. as a shared geopolitical threat. COVID-19 reinforces pre-existing complementarities between these two authoritarian regimes in the political, economic, and military-security spheres. Russia and China appear to coordinate disinformation to amplify pre-existing tensions in the West, with Russia focused more on Europe, China on the United States.

In post-Soviet states, COVID-19 provided Russia with potential avenues to exert influence as the pandemic takes hold, but these also come with challenges. If the Ukrainian health system collapses and civil unrest occurs, an authoritarian turn could be the consequence. This could bring an authoritarian Ukraine, one ready to join the “Authoritarian International,” under Russian leadership. On the other hand, Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry demands Russia give international monitoring missions and aid organizations (such as the International Committee of the Red Cross) unrestricted access to Donbas in accordance with Minsk agreement commitments to prevent the spread of COVID-19. With regards to Belarus, Russia has suspended integration. Unilaterally sealing the Russia-Belarus border between March 19 and May 1, 2020 has a psychological impact: the notion of Slavic “solidarity” has new meaning. Belarus’s President Lukashenka has described the global COVID-19 pandemic as “psychopathy,” “psychosis,” and called it “absolute and utter stupidity.”²⁰ If Belarus’s health system collapses as a result of the pandemic, Russia will offer humanitarian relief and promote the State Union as a panacea.

With regards to the Baltic States, COVID-19 has highlighted the need to build a capacity so that governments can directly deliver Russian-language COVID-19 crisis information to their Russian speakers as information on the pandemic from Russian media through March 2020 played down the crisis: “The fact that the Estonian population lives in two information spaces prevents us from stopping the spread of the coronavirus.”²¹ In Poland, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs called in Russia’s Ambassador to address disinformation that Poland had denied flight access of the “From Russia with Love” aid relief to Italy. Stanislaw Zaryn, spokesman for Poland’s security services chief, stated that Russia was seeking to destabilize other countries while trying to boost its own international profile amid the virus crisis.²² Another startling example of Russian disinformation was reported by *24Chasa*, a high-circulation politically non-partisan Bulgarian daily newspaper. Various, 20,000, 25,000, or 37,000 U.S. troops, immunized from or infected with COVID-19, had amassed in Novoselo and Bezmer and under the cover of the “Defender Europe 2020” exercise were preparing to launch an attack on Russia and war against Putin.²³

Russia has attempted to instrumentalize and manipulate COVID-19 to both break sanctions and, paradoxically, erode its international isolation (even as it closes its borders) in the name of humanitarianism and to enable Russia’s contributions to the international public good. Russia has criticized the U.S. for its alleged “anti-humanitarian” economic sanctions against Iran. In a video conference of G20 leaders on 26 March, President Putin argued: “Ideally, we should

²⁰ Valeryy Karbalevich, “Pernicious Overconfidence,” *Belorusskiy Partizan* Website, in Russian, March 24, 2020.

²¹ Unattributed Editorial, “Two Information Spaces Do Corona a Favour,” *Essti Paevaleht*, Tallinn, in Estonian, March 27, 2020.

²² “Polish official says Russia steps up ‘disinformation’ effort,” *Polskie Rado 1*, Warsaw, in English, 0855 GMT, March 27, 2020.

²³ Unattributed report: “Fake News: There Are 20,000, 25,000, or 37,000 US Troops in Bulgaria. Fact: The Actual Number Is Zero,” *24 Chasa*, in Bulgarian 1522 GMT, March 24, 2020.

introduce a moratorium—a moratorium of solidarity—on restrictions regarding essential goods, as well as on financial transactions for their purchase.” He called for the creation of “so-called green corridors, unaffected by trade wars and sanctions for the reciprocal supply of medication, food products, equipment and technology.”²⁴ First deputy chairman of the Federation Council's committee on international affairs Vladimir Dzhubarov: “I want to believe that Western leaders, many of whom have found themselves in a difficult situation, will as quickly as possible realize the futility of their confrontation policy and not wait until an apocalyptic scenario starts unfolding.”²⁵

On March 23, 2020, fifteen Ilyushin cargo planes carrying twenty-two military trucks, 122 personnel, and assorted equipment from Russia’s Radiation, Chemical and Biological Defense Troops (RKhBZ) landed in Italy and headed to Bergamo in what was branded a “From Russia with Love” COVID-19 humanitarian relief operation. Russian media widely reported the operation, with “60 Minut” host Olga Skabeyeva gleefully noting that Russian troops were freely “driving on NATO roads in the heart of Europe.”²⁶ Analysts noted that this operation represented a geopolitical and diplomatic coup for Russia, allowing it to wedge its military into the Italian theater; “Russia’s benevolence will be useful to oppose new sanctions and to signal to the rest of Europe that it still has a sphere of influence.” An article published in left-of-center daily *La Stampa* quoted anonymous “high-ranking political sources” as saying that “80 per cent of Russian supplies is useless or almost useless to Italy. It’s barely a pretext.”²⁷

Hamish De Bretton-Gordon, the former commander of the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Defense Battalion and the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, said

It's strange that the Russians have stepped in. It's true that these specific troops are able to carry out decontamination, but so are Italian troops, and they're more modern. It's very odd and it just doesn't add up: Italians are on the frontline of NATO's biochemical weapons defense system and don't need any advice from the Russians. Will we see them on the streets of London next? . . . There's no doubt that there are GRU officials amongst the Russian troops that are now in Italy. They will be looking to find out whatever they can on the Italian forces, they will set up intelligence networks, and they are likely already very active.²⁸

Putin’s Operational Code and COVID

A decision-maker’s “operational code” consists of the rules, causal relationships, fundamental assumptions, and beliefs that filter, structure and order their perception of reality and the weight given to alternative courses of action. When examining strategic decision-making in Russia, we can note five recurring characteristics under Putin, particularly in evidence after 2014. First,

²⁴ “Putin urges sanctions moratorium over virus,” Rossiya 24 News Channel, Moscow, in Russian, 1504 GMT, March 26, 2020.

²⁵ Roundup: “Russian press says anti-coronavirus measures ‘insufficient,’” BBC Monitoring, in Russian, March 27, 2020.

²⁶ Roundup: “Russian talk show review: Coronavirus - praise for Putin and Italy mission,” BBC Monitoring, March 29, 2020.

²⁷ Report: “Italian media view Russian aid as ‘useless’ but effective propaganda,” BBC Monitoring, March 27, 2020.

²⁸ Jacopo Iacoboni, Natalia Antelava, Cecilia Butini, “Russian aid to Italy against Coronavirus, General Kikot, and the fears over military intelligence,” *La Stampa*, in Italian, April 1, 2020.

strategic calculation is based on poor threat analysis and understanding of the strategic environment, a “broken lens” threat assessment. Second, Putin’s understanding of risk, as well as his perception of costs/benefits and tipping points, determine when decisions are made and define the intent of the decisions. Third, Putin can adopt tactical, improvised, and opportunistic responses to changing circumstances, given strategic decision-making processes take place in small groups operating outside of formal structures, with few if any formal checks and balances. Fourth, a “style of indirect interpretation” and ambiguity characterizes the communication of decisions. Fifth, decisions made appear to have more to do with affirmation, validation, acknowledgement, and the need for respect, particularly from the United States, as achieving the stated aim. Rule-breaking does not prohibit action; rather it encourages action. According to this understanding, to break rules without being punished is the hallmark of a Great Power.

In the case of COVID-19, two of these features are particularly intriguing: ambiguity and the role of the U.S. as a strategic benchmark. Many analysts have highlighted the ambiguity in Putin’s responses to COVID-19, though fewer have attempted to offer explanations to account for this feature. President Putin of course wants to avoid the optics of COVID-19 in Italy, but at the same time maintain a more moderate response, gradually shifting towards quarantine measures, camouflaged by euphemisms such as “community-acquired pneumonia” instead of COVID-19, “holiday” and “paid leave” instead of “quarantine,” “lockdown,” and “state of emergency” to avoid panic. He has delegated day-to-day management of the crisis responses to Mayor Sobyenin, Prime Minister Mishustin, and regional governors, and the costs onto SME’s and the middle class, while Putin himself is conspicuous only by his absence and appears indecisive and inconsistent. How can we account for what appears to be a “muddling through” COVID-19 response?

First, Putin understands himself as a foreign policy president, able to navigate grand strategy and restore Russia’s status and pride. One notable COVID-19 example is Putin’s support for the “From Russia with Love” special operation, which highlighted cooperation between right-wing parties in Germany, Italy, and Russia as well as their influence on President Putin.²⁹ Russia is a deterrence by punishment power, able to inflict unacceptable damage and cost in defense of Russia and its allies. In the COVID-19 context, this translates into Putin deciding which states it will share a vaccine with once one is created and curating special operations to enhance Russia’s prestige and undermine the integrity of adversaries. Prior to the arrival of this magic bullet, Putin considers COVID-19 as an apolitical public health and medical matter, the delegated domain of bureaucratic managers. This explanation argues that Putin’s actions are explained by continuity in the division of labor between the President and grand strategy and government and domestic policy implementation responsibilities.

Second, Putin can act and has acted decisively but is risk-averse when he cannot judge likely outcomes. What appears to be paralysis is in fact a well-considered strategic pause to allow Putin to assess responses in the face of COVID-19 unpredictability and uncertainty. The difficulty here is that COVID-19 pathology is predictable, with exponential growth as the number of recorded deaths increase day-by-day in Moscow. COVID-19 burns through human populations where it can. Thus, anything less than all-out “war” led by Putin as a “wartime” president appears to be

²⁹ Report: “German politician ‘brokered Russian Covid-19 aid’ for Italy,” BBC Monitoring, March 27, 2020.

weakness. This appearance is compounded by Putin himself working remotely and minimizing face-to-face contacts, making him reliant on impersonal on-line communication, which is not his strength.

Third, Putin realizes the gravity of the situation and delegates in order to politically immunize himself against the COVID-19 legitimization trap. Putin extends “authority but not power” to Major Sobyenin, who lacks Putin’s “unambiguous backing.”³⁰ In this way, Putin can shift blame and responsibility onto the shoulders of domestic managers to preserve his father-figure reputation and image for competence and cunning. This allows President Putin to step back in as a neutral arbitrator, decisively fire unpopular governors, and even offer constructive course corrections. In addition, given President Putin has favorably compared Russian control to failed European state of emergency responses and high death rates, declaring a state of emergency in Russia would undercut this narrative and invite closer comparisons of actual responses, a focus on the Russian reality behind the rhetoric.

Fourth, Putin’s pronounced reluctance to mobilize and deploy the accumulated strategic reserves is notable and difficult to explain. One calculus might be that to push the costs of COVID-19 onto the SME “creative entrepreneur class” has little political costs, given this group were generally unsupportive but politically neutered (with a ban on mass demonstrations), while protecting the State Owned Enterprises (for example, Rosneft, Rosvertol and Uralvagonzavod) run by his loyal inner circle and entourage. In addition, Putin saves strategic reserves for what he might consider a more “real” emergency worthy of his personal attention, such as a global depression. Thus Putin’s responses also can be explained by his predictive thinking.

Fifth, Putin is animated by the need to uphold the myth of the power vertical. While democratic leaders may resist lockdowns and quarantines given the need to balance civil liberties and democratic oversight and accountability with the need for restrictions and control, Putin may resist the same. In his second COVID-19 address to the nation, Putin, remarkably, did not mention once the National Guard, Interior Ministry, or Federal Security Service. Again, Putin’s predictive thinking may be on display; Putin understands that mobilization for and then mismanagement of a COVID-19 state of emergency would expose the lack of a functioning power vertical and the incompetence of the bureaucracy and fatally undermine the Putin brand as security guarantor. Paradoxically, after twenty years of President Putin, in reality the greater the centralization and control, the less the security bloc can manage. In addition, the declaration of a state of emergency entails effective coordination and cooperation between the defense-security bloc and public health and social services “which is unimaginable in our country. In other words, if the virus in Russia reaches the scale it has reached in France or Italy, our country will descend into chaos that will last for months.”³¹

The role of the U.S. as Russia’s strategic benchmark is also on display; we see both aspects of this at work. Following a “very constructive” phone call between President Trump and President Putin to discuss Russia’s plans to send a plane with medical equipment to the U.S. to help

³⁰ Mark Galeotti, “Moscow's Mayor, Not Putin, Is Leading Russia’s Coronavirus Fight. Will He Be Allowed to Do the Job?” *The Moscow Times*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/26/moscows-mayor-not-putin-is-leading-russias-coronavirus-fight-will-he-be-allowed-to-do-the-job-a69759>, accessed April 10, 2020.

³¹ Vladislav Inozemtzev, “2020: Russia’s historical watershed,” *Riddle*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.ridl.io/en/2020-russia-s-historical-watershed/>, accessed April 10, 2020.

counter COVID-19, state-run channel Rossiya 1 reported: “today, in the U.S. they are awaiting the arrival of a Russian aircraft with humanitarian aid. The special flight will deliver medical appliances, equipment, and protective gear for the fight against coronavirus.” Putin’s press spokesman Dmitry Peskov noted that “in offering his American colleagues help, Putin was acting on the basis that when medical producers in the USA gain momentum, in case of need they will be able to respond reciprocally” and stressed the need for “mutual help and partnership.”³² The aid was billed as free, with the expectation that the U.S. would reciprocate if need be. Then, when the U.S. officials corrected the record to note the U.S. had purchased the aid, Russian media outlets reported the costs had been equally split. Thus, COVID-19 highlights the role of equality, reciprocity, and parity with the U.S. in Russian strategy thinking.

Another aspect of the U.S. as Russia’s strategic benchmark is the constant desire in the Kremlin to declare victory over and defeat of the United States. Official narratives promote this notion. As early as January 22, 2020, *Sputnik News* reported that COVID-19 was a man-made weapon created by NATO. Russian state-run media endorse the unproven allegation by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao that “it might be U.S. Army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan.”³³ COVID-19, this narrative continued, exposes the ineffectiveness of NATO and the EU. Nationalist commentator Konstantin Malofeyev argues that after the “American” 20th century, a “new world is coming,” and that “globalization has failed.”³⁴ As the best form of defense is attack, Russia is quick to condemn Western accusations that Russia is spreading disinformation, including those made by U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo and an E.U. report, about the pandemic in order to sow division in the West: “coronavirus is mutating and has become symbiotic with the virus of Russophobia.”³⁵

Conclusion

This study analyses and illustrates the roles of ambiguity and risk calculus and the function of the U.S. as a strategic benchmark for Russia in President Putin’s operational code. It suggests that an attempt to understand Putin’s operational code does provide a useful analytical lens, generating insights into decisions and what could be called “Putin’s playbook.” The study offers five not necessarily exclusive explanation as to why Putin behaves as he does, mixing the human factor (fear and puzzlement) with strategic and policy concerns. President Putin is caught by a paradox: the longer he waits to front the crisis, the worse the epidemic impacts the public, the harder it is for Putin to take control, as the more his insertion into the crisis raises questions about his leadership performance, threat assessments, and overall decision-making competence. Leaders are only as good as the last crisis they manage. COVID-19 will embody the fundamental leadership perceptions of President Putin and the strengths and weaknesses of “Putinism” as it evolves in the late Putin period.

³² Report: “Russian TV hails Covid-19 aid for US,” BBC Monitoring, April 1, 2020.

³³ Roundup: “Russian talk show review: Coronavirus,” BBC Monitoring, March 25, 2020.

³⁴ Roundup: “Russian talk show review,” (Main themes on Russian TV Talk shows on Rossiya 1 and Channel One on 16-22 March), BBC Monitoring, March 25, 2020.

³⁵ Roundup: “Russian talk show review,” BBC Monitoring, March 25, 2020.

About the Author

Dr. Graeme P. Herd is a Professor of Transnational Security and Chair of the Research and Policy Analysis Department at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. He directs a Russian Strategy Initiative funded and GCMC-led research project that examines Russia's strategic behavior. This article is based upon research undertaken for Dr. Herd's presentation on April 7, 2020 in support of the Eurasian Foreign Area Officer (FAO) program and benefitted from the questions and comments from FAO's and those participating remotely.

Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI): *This program of research, led by the GCMC and funded by RSI (U.S. Department of Defense effort to enhance understanding of the Russian way of war in order to inform strategy and planning), employs in-depth case studies to better understand Russian strategic behavior in order to mitigate miscalculation in relations.*

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