

## THE IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS ON PUTIN'S POWER

*By Daniel Sixto*



*Vladimir Putin's response to the coronavirus removed his aura of unwavering leadership, leaving Moscow questioning its next steps.*

Rising COVID-19 cases revealed that the Russian people no longer trust their government to manage the global pandemic, possibly leaving a defining imprint on President Vladimir Putin's legacy. Even after a referendum to reform the Russian constitution passed in July, Putin's future as President for an [additional two terms](#) may be at risk. Russia, the world's [fourth-most affected](#) state by the novel coronavirus, has reached over 1.5 million cases. Meanwhile, Putin hasn't enforced measures that could prevent a rise in cases. Instead, he failed to supply regional oblasts and republics with supplies to combat the pandemic, hasn't cared for the financially insecure Russian population, and attempted various power grabs while [residing in his home](#) on the outskirts of Moscow. This ineffective response [likely changed](#) the public's perception of the Kremlin, giving rise to protests and [historically low](#) approval ratings for Putin.



## RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Putin failed to provide support to regional oblasts, republics and other federal subjects. Russia's [centralized](#) government prevents decisive action at a local level, instead requiring permission from Moscow to access financial reserves to address the pandemic. Consequently, the governors of various regions, such as Arkhangelsk and Komi, were [unable](#) to address the pandemic until orders from Putin reached their regional heads. Unfortunately, Putin took weeks to delineate any orders, leading to crises across Russia's regions. For example, in the Republic of Dagestan, one of the [poorest](#) areas of the North Caucasus, cases rose so high that one city's main hospital [reached patient capacity](#), preventing it from admitting new patients just as the pandemic began to take foot. Additionally, a lack of access to COVID-19 medications prevented doctors from treating patients at the Khasavyurt hospital in the same area.

## ERODING TRUST

Putin's inadequate response to the coronavirus eroded the trust between Russian citizens and the Kremlin. In late April, demonstrators [gathered](#) in southern Russia to protest job losses and lack of information. In Moscow, many doctors, medical professionals, and other civilians no longer trust the government's official infection numbers and [publicly protest](#) against their lack of protective gear and rapidly filling hospitals. Adding salt to the wound, Putin's weak coronavirus relief packages failed to provide Russians and their businesses with adequate resources to stay afloat. In fact, Russia's original [\\$4 billion relief plan](#) amounted to around 0.2% of Russia's GDP; an abysmally low number compared to the United States' [\\$2 trillion relief package](#), which amounted to about 10% of the United States' GDP. Protests only expanded across Russia as Putin's approval rating dropped to a [historic low](#), forcing Moscow to [consider](#) a second, more effective recovery plan.

In Khabarovsk, a region in Russia's far east, a longstanding disconnect between the locals and Moscow reached a peak after Kremlin officials [arrested](#) Sergei Furgal, the region's



popular governor, over a suspected murder that he committed 15 years ago. The locals believe that the charges were politically motivated, [sparking ongoing protests](#) which have consistently numbered in the tens of thousands over the past three months. Recently, police officers engaged in [brutal crackdowns](#) of protestors, representing the Kremlin's continuous fruitless displays of authoritarianism and reluctance to listen to the Russian people.

Putin's [attempts](#) to demonstrate power and Russian order only backfired, leading to increased unrest. In early June, Russian opposition journalist Ilya Azar was [arrested](#) after peacefully protesting against police brutality in Russia. Following his arrest, various journalists [condemned](#) the Kremlin for his unlawful arrest and marched in solidarity of their colleague. In addition, Putin's [obsession](#) to celebrate the World War II Victory Day Parade demonstrated Putin's lack of commitment to initially tackle rising coronavirus cases in Russia. Instead, he invited Russia's authoritarian allies to attend an extravagant propaganda stunt aimed to garner public support for the regime. However, Putin's insistence to gather thousands of soldiers for a public, and largely mask-less, parade amidst a global pandemic while [60% of Russians](#) reported a loss in income failed to draw any support. The Kremlin [cancelled](#) most protests outside of Moscow, also likely hindering Putin's goal of invigorating Russian national pride amidst the pandemic.

Further, Putin, in hopes of remaining President for life, [held a referendum](#) to reform the constitution and allow him to remain in power until 2036. The Russian government announced the referendum's results [five hours](#) before polls closed, and many independent observers subsequently discredited the vote as illegitimate. The Kremlin portrayed the referendum as the public's "[triumphant vote of confidence](#)." In reality, the Kremlin [attached](#) key social reform to the ballot including pensions and minimum wage, which likely drew more Russians to the polls.

In late August, Alexei Navalny, Putin's leading opponent in Russia, was hospitalized after a [suspected poisoning](#) from the Kremlin. Russia's poisoning of Navalny represents one of many victims to acts of intimidation. This time, though, Moscow's plans backfired, and the



opposition leader's approval [ratings surged](#). In Novosibirsk, Russia's third largest city, a coalition of Navalny supporters successfully gained enough seats in the council to [remove](#) Putin's United Russia party's majority in the body. Navalny's poison only emboldened the Russian opposition, undermining the legitimacy of the Kremlin's action and receiving [international condemnation](#).

## PUTIN'S FUTURE IN POWER

Putin's inability to lead Russia amidst the COVID-19 pandemic left a powerful imprint on his legacy, probably affecting [re-election ambitions](#) for the 2024 cycle. Since the virus [reached](#) Russia in late January, Russia's closest allies have turned on Moscow and anti-Kremlin protestors flooded the streets. Putin may have secured his re-election eligibility for 2024 in a rigged referendum, but confidence in the President [remains](#) at a historic low. The post-Soviet space also threatens Russian confidence as strikes in Belarus [gain momentum](#), violence in the Caucasus [escalates](#), and political instability [rocks](#) Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. Putin's lack of leadership is both domestically and internationally evident, and voters won't likely forget the effects of COVID-19 on their livelihoods, possibly mounting a considerable opposition in the 2024 election.