

# Coronavirus and Russia's immune system

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In the context of the greatest health crisis of modern times, more than 150 countries are now affected by the Covid-19.<sup>1</sup> The epidemic - that has come from Wuhan, China, for reasons that are still unknown - is spreading mainly in Europe, where the most afflicted country is Italy, followed by Spain, Germany and France<sup>2</sup>. Among the nations facing the epidemic, there is also Russia: the largest nation in the world, sharing its borders with China, and whose capital, Moscow, is a dynamic commercial city. Still, Russia has fewer confirmed cases than Luxembourg<sup>3</sup>. The virus seems to be spreading everywhere but the Russian Federation remains almost immune. What is certain is that the Kremlin, whether by its initial strategy or by the way it establishes its statistics, is once again

taking advantage of the situation in order to challenge the West by projecting the image of a strong country, a nation resistant to any danger.

## Russia's strategy to contain the virus

According to TASS, the led-government news agency, the number of coronavirus cases in Russia rose to 367 on March 22. So far, there has been "only" one official death directly related to the coronavirus<sup>4</sup>. Although in the previous days Russian Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova said there were "no reasons to panic over the spread of the novel coronavirus in Russia"<sup>5</sup>, the internal measures are becoming stricter just now. Instead,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

<sup>2</sup> ibidem

<sup>3</sup> ibidem

<sup>4</sup> ibidem

<sup>5</sup> "Coronavirus cases in Russia rise to 367", TASS, 22 March 2020. <https://tass.com/society/1133697>

concerning its foreign policy, already at the end of January, business trips to China operated by Russian airlines were temporarily suspended. In February, a travel ban for all Chinese citizens was introduced. This measure was accompanied by the instauration of quarantine zones for all travellers passing through China. Finally, the borders connecting Russia and China were closed. Later, tourist trips to Italy, Iran, and South Korea were suspended, while, on February 28, Moscow suspended entry visas for all Iranian citizens. At the same time, all travellers from these countries were prevented from entering Russia.

At the moment, after the closure of the last land border (with Belarus) and the suspension of rail links with Poland, Norway, Latvia, Moldova, Ukraine<sup>6</sup>, Russia is completely shielded and relying solely on its own capacities.

### **A "strong" Russia vs. an "inefficient" West**

At the basis of the Russian decisions taken to contain the Coronavirus, there is a twofold objective: on the one hand, there is the desire to impose on the world the portrait of a strong, resilient Russia, ready against any danger and on top of events. "Despite the high risk, the situation is on the whole under control"<sup>7</sup>, said earlier Putin addressing the Russian population.

Russia's goal seems clear: to exploit other countries' vulnerability in order to improve its image. If other European countries found themselves overwhelmed by the spreading of

the virus, it is because of their initial mismanagement of the situation. This is what makes Russia different from Western countries. In fact, Russia was capable of controlling the situation from the appearance of the very first cases, without any hesitation.

This "fearlessness" was apparent even in other contexts. For instance, while the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) was still considering organising the European championship next summer, Dmitry Chernyshenko - Deputy Premier of Russia, proposed Russia as a possible venue for hosting other matches. A simple and apparently banal gesture, but which explains Russia's ambition: "if you are worried about the Coronavirus, come to Russia to play".

On the other hand, the Kremlin's desire is to differentiate itself from the "other countries", especially the European countries, and to demonstrate Russia's efficiency in comparison with their poor management. "We must do everything we can to avoid experiencing other countries' scenario", said Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin at a government meeting<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, Russia continues to be an exception in this global crisis and it would have no better opportunity to denigrate Europe and its actions. In an article published on March 11, Maxim Trudolyubov, Senior Fellow at the Kennan Institute in Washington D.C., explains how China began to control the biological threat, showing how effective a modern authoritarian state can be<sup>9</sup>. This is also Russia's

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<sup>6</sup> "Coronavirus : La Russie s'isole en espérant échapper à l'épidémie", La Croix, 16 March 2020. <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Europe/Coronavirus-Russie-sisole-esperant-echapper-lepidemie-2020-03-16-1201084403>

<sup>7</sup> "Президент обратился к россиянам в связи с коронавирусом: «Риск высокий, но ситуация под

контролем», Ampravda, 12 March 2020.

<https://www.ampravda.ru/2020/03/18/094593.html>

<sup>8</sup> "Россия закрывает границу с Белоруссией", ТАСС, 16 March 2020. <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/7987367>

<sup>9</sup> "Два страха, два спасения", Максим Трудолюбов, COLTA, 11 March 2020.

wish: to make the West reconsider Moscow's effectiveness and underline the decadence of Europe's democracies. The Kremlin's strategy did not pass unnoticed by the European Union, which in fact accused Russia of "deploying coronavirus disinformation to sow panic in West" in the nine-page internal document produced by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and dated March 16. The document states: "The overarching aim of Kremlin disinformation is to aggravate the public health crisis in Western countries...in line with the Kremlin's broader strategy of attempting to subvert European societies"<sup>10</sup>. In sum, Russia aims at making itself once again the only saviour of its people by glorifying its conservatism, one of Putin's philosophical pillars<sup>11</sup>.

### **What would be the danger for an infected Russia?**

Despite the Kremlin's previous assurances that the country is "far from an epidemic"<sup>12</sup>, Russia is more linked to Europe and vulnerable to global threats than it is willing to admit. This global situation has taught us that we are living in a historical moment, in which everything is unpredictable. This means that it is not possible to know whether Russia will be able to maintain its current state of "calm" for much longer. However, one thing is certain: in a regime that is currently engaged in an operation to change the Constitution, additional restrictive measures are likely to raise political suspicions. After the Duma authorised Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to renew twice his term as

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<https://www.colta.ru/articles/society/23786-maksim-trudolyubov-o-svobode-bezopasnosti-i-koronaviruse>

<sup>10</sup> Russia deploying coronavirus disinformation to sow panic in West, EU document says, Reuters, 18 March 2020.

President on March 10, the coronavirus could also be a good pretext to suppress possible future protests. Still, the real danger is the disastrous state of the health care system: in recent decades, the number of hospital beds has been reduced by almost half, and the cuts of the last two years have led to several strikes and protests from health care workers and patients. In the event of an epidemic, the system would risk collapsing.

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Fédorovski (2017). "Poutine de A à Z". Stock, France.

<sup>12</sup> Песков: Россия далека от эпидемии коронавируса, VESTI RU, 12 March 2020.

<https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=3247411>



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