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Mitigating the Social Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Russia's Social Policy Response

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the political context of the spread of COVID-19 in Russia, identifies major social support programs, and evaluates their impact on mitigating undesired consequences for the population. Relying on the analysis of state support programs, expert evaluations of their impact, and academic papers devoted to the political and socioeconomic context, the paper reaches several conclusions. First, the particularity of the political regime and its dynamic account for (1) the prioritization of the political agenda to adopt amendments to the Constitution over preventive measures to contain the pandemic, (2) the leading role of presidential decrees in identifying the main priorities of state support, and (3) the limited managerial capacities and financial resources of regional authorities to contain the pandemic and its consequences. Second, the particularity of the social policy response, including the focus on families with children and the categorization of beneficiaries of state assistance, mirrors the existing principles and priorities of welfare provision in Russia. Third, the scope of financial support is seen as inadequate by experts. The introduced temporary measures and the absence of additional measures of support during the autumn rise in the number of COVID-19 cases show that the political leadership has underestimated the long-term consequences of the crisis.

The Political Context of the Outbreak in Russia

There were two main starting points of COVID-19 spread in Russia. First, two Chinese citizens in Tyumen (Siberia) and Chita (Russian Far East) were confirmed as having tested positive on January 31, 2020. Second, as in many other countries, metropolitan areas—including Moscow and St. Petersburg—were hit first and hardest. The limited mobility of the population was the key explanation for the slow spread of COVID-19 in the very early days of the pandemic. However, by March 25, 2020, the number of cases had increased to 57, provoking an outbreak of up to 500 cases by March 31 and 7,000 cases by April 30, according to worldometers.info. Despite having the advantages of quite a lot of time to respond and low popular mobility, the national government did not react promptly by promulgating preventive measures. Moreover, the state TV channels actively misinformed people, making light of the threat posed by COVID-19 and suggesting conspiracy theories to explain mass media coverage around the globe. The working group under the State Council of the Russian Federation on prevention of pandemic spread in the Russian Federation was created by presidential decree on March 15. The closure of air (March 27) and land borders (March 30) could not prevent the rapid spread of the virus within the country. As a result of the slow and incompetent initial response, cases had been confirmed in all Russian regions by mid-April 2020, requiring tight isolation regimes in many territories.

The spread of the pandemic in Russia coincided with big political changes related to the adoption of the new Constitution, which mainly aimed to allow the current president to maintain power in the future by removing the limitations on running “more than two times in row” (Teague 2020). These changes could certainly have been postponed until after the crisis, since the presidential elections are scheduled for 2024. However, the entire political system and federal government were immersed in this process, impeding a prompt reaction to the evolving pandemic. Despite worrying developments in other countries and in Russia, April 22 was officially declared the “All-Russian voting day” on the new Constitution in Presidential Decree #188, adopted on March 17, 2020. This shows, among other things, the extent to which the evolving pandemic was underestimated by the political leadership in mid-March, even though the potentially high risk was obvious, with more than 20,000 new cases being identified daily around the world (according to worldometers.info). Evidently, in the minds of politicians, this political agenda outweighed the need for caution related to large gatherings to inhibit COVID-19 transmission among the population. In light of the outbreak that happened in Russia in the spring, the vote was ultimately postponed. However, despite the potential danger posed by mass gatherings, the so-called All-Russian voting day was rescheduled for July 1, 2020, with the opportunity to vote from June 25. This demonstrates the priority of the political agenda over the potential consequences of mass gatherings due to the All-Russian voting day.

Particularity of COVID-19 Regulations in Russia: Legislative versus Executive Regulations

Three main types of regulations have been used as legal instruments for mitigating the consequences of the pandemic in Russia: first, presidential decrees, accompanied by governmental decrees, which mainly target social benefits toward families with children; second, national government decrees and regulations, which also serve as a basis of social support for medical personnel and social workers, unemployment benefits, etc.; and third, national legislation adopted by the national parliament, which mainly aims to deregulate various spheres of the economy and reduce bureaucratic barriers. The composition of regulations mirrors the previously existing pattern of executive power, with the president on top as the key actor who is in charge of distribution policy, including budgetary spending, and the parliament as a technical and secondary actor without any political role—including budgetary spending—during times of crisis.

Governmental and presidential regulations are well-known in Russia as a source of generosity, while all welfare retrenchments come from the State Duma (national parliament), as with the increase in pension rates in 2018, for example. Almost all measures related to the pandemic, including family benefits, unemployment benefits, tax relief, a moratorium on bankruptcy procedure, etc., were introduced by the president in his proclamations of March 25, 2020. The vast majority of further state measures were adopted in compliance with and in order to implement these presidential proclamations. This domination of executive power over legislative power explains why the first and key measures were introduced through presidential decrees and why those regulations related to business, for example, were promulgated by federal laws. It is also important to keep in mind that the President's Address, which took place on January 15, 2020, had already announced the development of National Priority Programs and additional support and benefits for children. A couple of the social support programs announced in January 2020 as part of his political agenda were used as instruments for mitigating the effects of the pandemic.

Despite centralized decision-making and the domination of the federal level of governance, the responsibility for containing the spread of COVID-19 and implementing federal support measures (for example, social benefits for the population and tax reductions for businesses) was forced on the regional authorities. They were free to regulate the mobility of the population and health care services as well as social measures

to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic. However, the existing “power vertical”—which holds all levels of governance politically, financially, and administratively accountable to the central government and the president (Smyth et al. 2020)—and the negative selection of politically loyal governors during previous years encouraged the maintenance of weak and dependent regional authorities. As a result, regional reactions to contain the COVID-19 pandemic were suboptimal. For example, the governor of St. Petersburg demonstrated ineffective management, trying to transform high-tech cancer and similar hospitals into COVID-oriented treatment facilities. The mayor of Moscow, meanwhile, began to use digital monitoring to impose sanctions (fines) on residents who broke the isolation regime. In contrast to other countries, technologies were employed not to trace the infected and isolate them but to punish those who violated rules. Another set of regional cases that deserves attention is the republics of the North Caucasus, in particular the Republic of Dagestan. Dagestan demonstrated an extremely high level of deaths and the inadequate reaction of the regional authorities resonated globally (Washington Post 2020; The Moscow Times 2020). This outbreak, the largest in Russia, is explained by Cook and Twigg (2020) as resulting from distrust in government and poor health care infrastructure.

All in all, the political regime, the power vertical, and the particularity of decision-making in general (and the federal system of government in particular) comprise the peculiar context for the initial response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic in Russia.

Categorization of Beneficiaries: Families, Health Care, and Social Workers

The central government supported several policy spheres, including assistance for families with children, the unemployed, health care and social workers, housing (mortgages and loans), business (tax reductions and moratorium on bankruptcy), etc. The set of support measures was published on the national government's official website to spread information among the population.¹ The main features of social benefits introduced or enhanced during the pandemic reflect the underlying principle of Russian welfare provision in general, namely the stratification and categorization of beneficiaries. Two main social groups—families with children and health care workers—were divided into several groups. Each of these groups became eligible for different levels of monetary benefits, creating inequality of support within these groups.

The dominant government response was support of families with children and the subsidizing of salaries at

1 The official website of the national government with the description of all existing measures of support (in Russian): http://government.ru/support_measures/category/social/

a minimal level (Discussion Paper #4, 2020) with the help of newly introduced measures and the extension of existing ones. Three new policy measures have been adopted in response to the pandemic, while funding within existing policies has been increased. The first new policy was a single payment per child aged 3–16 years (10,000 rubles, equivalent to 130 euros as of June 1, 2020). According to national government estimates, 19.7 million children received this support, with 197.2 million rubles allotted in the federal budget for the implementation of this program (Discussion Paper #4, 2020). Second was a monthly payment (5,000 rubles, equivalent to 65 euros as of June 1, 2020) for each child in a family under 3 years old eligible for three months (April, May, and June 2020). This payment was available for 5 million children. Third was a monthly payment (3,000 rubles, or approximately 40 euros) for each child under 18 if his/her parents were officially registered as unemployed after March 1, 2020. According to Governmental Decree #485, adopted on April 12, 2020, there are 33.36 billion rubles allotted in the budget for this purpose. Overall, experts estimate that these payments will add 288 billion rubles to the income of the Russian population, comprising 0.5% of the total income of the population in 2019 (Discussion Paper #4, 2020).

The existing measures were extended and include two main monthly payments for children. First is a monthly payment for each child 3–7 years old whose family income is less than or equal to the minimum living wage in their region, which was announced in January 2020. Due to the pandemic, it came into effect one month earlier than planned (on June 1 instead of July 1). Second, the existing allowance for care of the first child under 1.5 years provided to unemployed parents, including students, was doubled to 6,752 rubles (86 euros) from June 1. As a result, this support reached the same level as the existing one for the second child on within a family. In the Far North, an additional amount is added due to the unfavorable climatic conditions. The cost of these two measures will reach 120 billion rubles in 2020, which is equal to 0.2% of the population's total income in 2019 (Discussion Paper #4, 2020, p. 4). Some regional authorities introduced their own support measures in addition to the federal ones. For example, the Lipetsk region introduced a family allowance (12,130 rubles, or approximately 155 euros) for those parents with children who were forced to take unpaid vacations due to the epidemiological situation. In the Krasnodar region, each child whose parents received minimal unemployment benefits became entitled to 3,000 rubles (39 euros). In several regions, including the Leningrad region, Sverdlovsk region, and Krasnodar region, single payments for families with three or more children, families with disabled children, and low-income families were introduced (Discussion Paper #4, 2020, p. 6).

The second social group that became entitled to assistance was frontline health care workers. It is interesting to see how the regulations tend to distinguish between various categories of social and health care workers who are involved in caring for COVID-19 patients. These payments were available from April to August 2020. The presidential and governmental decrees rewarded highly-qualified doctors with the highest benefit, equaling 80,000 extra rubles per month (which is approximately twice the average monthly wage in Russia), while junior medical personnel and ambulance drivers were granted 25,000 rubles per month. (While these decrees target mainly public health care facilities, private hospitals are said to be eligible for some regional support programs.) The same logic is applicable to public social workers, who, depending on their level of professional qualification, are eligible for additional monthly payments, from 10,000 or 15,000 rubles to 40,000 or 60,000 rubles. These benefits go to public social workers who were isolated at residential facilities in quarantine with residents of social organizations (the elderly, disabled, children without parental care, etc.). The payments are limited (paid from April 15 through October 15, 2020) and target only those whose work shift was 14 days or more. The payments include an additional 4.5 billion rubles which were transferred to health care workers employed in ministry-related health care entities, including the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard of Russia (*Rosgvardiia*), the Federal Medical-Biological Agency, the Federal Security Service, the Federal Service for Law Enforcement, and the Presidential Executive Office. It is indicative that health care workers from so-called departmental agencies (*vedomstvennye uchrezhdeniia*) of various ministries are mentioned separately. This is also due to their particular place in the welfare system of Russia, with prioritized health care entities for officials and bureaucrats constituting a separate echelon of health care in Russia.

As the described differentiation of categories of beneficiaries demonstrates, there are several categories within three social groups: families with children, health care workers, and social workers. The additional categorization is based on a child's age, a worker's level within the health care hierarchy, and professional status. This principle of categorization of beneficiaries of social support is inherited from Soviet-era social policy (in particular, the several categories of veterans). The path-dependence of categorical welfare provision inhibits the introduction of means-testing. Reliant as it is on categories, the Russian government fails to identify which citizens are in fact in need of support. Experts claim that the differentiation has the potential to create social tensions and be perceived as unfair by some deprived groups (Discussion Paper #4, 2020, p. 5). It produces inequality and tension among the various categories as well as manipulations both at the individual level and at the level of regional govern-

ments. Research demonstrates that the former tend to find ways of proving more privileged status to obtain larger payments, while the latter seek to reduce regional budget costs by relying on federal budget subsidies (Alexandrova and Struyk 2007; Kulmala and Tarasenko 2016).

There are other categories of beneficiaries, including the unemployed, pensioners, migrant workers, and workers for private companies. The need to equalize the unemployment benefit and the minimum living wage has been discussed for a long time and was finally achieved during the pandemic. Governmental Decree #346, adopted on March 27, 2020, promulgated this decision and simplified the registration of unemployment status in Russian regions, reducing bureaucratic barriers and creating an option to apply for unemployment status online. The minimum unemployment benefit was increased from 8,000 rubles (90 euros) to 12,130 rubles (135 euros) and was available for 3 months notwithstanding employment experience and qualification. As Natalia Zubarevich states, this measure encouraged the population to apply for unemployment support more actively than before (Zubarevich and Safronov 2020, p. 10). Individual entrepreneurs who terminated their activity after March 1, 2020, and officially registered as unemployed were also eligible for these payments. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection calculated that 450,000 unemployed people enjoyed this support in April–May 2020. These measures were terminated on October 1, 2020, under Governmental Decree #844, adopted on June 10, 2020.

The national government compiled a list of economic sectors that are eligible for state support to help relieve the effects of the pandemic. These sectors include transport, culture and leisure activities, education, tourism, hotels, public nutrition, consumer services, health care, and retail. The small businesses operating in these areas became eligible for direct financial support. Insurance payments for small businesses (for covering pension contribution and medical insurance) were halved, going from 30% to 15%, with the percentage calculated from the salary in case it is higher than the minimum living wage. This reduction of insurance payments is available until the end of 2020. Zero-interest bank loans that can be used only for salaries were also introduced.

There are several categories of people who did not receive benefits but for whom some bureaucratic procedures were relieved. In particular, for working citizens older than 65, sick leave is now arranged remotely, and these citizens are now eligible to obtain the average salary for their region while on sick leave. Migrant workers were granted the right to prolong their residence permit or work permit and other supplementary documents auto-

matically from March 15 through June 15, 2020, under Presidential Decree #274, adopted on April 18, 2020.

As this overview demonstrates, governmental support mainly targeted families with children, health care workers, and the unemployed. Improving the demographic situation has been central to the presidential political agenda in recent years (Kainu et al. 2017), hence families with children were among the beneficiaries of state support during the pandemic. As Cook and Twigg (2020) argue, there are three groups that were left behind by the support measures: labor migrants, informal-sector workers who are not eligible for free access to the health care system, and rural populations lacking quick access to medical facilities. In addition, pensioners got monetary and in-kind benefits only in a limited number of regions.

Evaluation of Social Policy Measures in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to experts, the assistance for families with children was not sufficient because these policy measures compensated, on average, for only 43% of lost income (Discussion Paper #4, 2020, p. 7). Given that families with children had insufficient income even before the pandemic, they did not gain much in comparison to families without children. Experts claim that the percentage of families of all categories in poverty increased from 12.5% to 20%, while the poverty rate for families with children grew from 21–26% to 31–35% (Discussion Paper #4, 2020, p. 7). The authors of the Discussion Paper conclude that newly introduced measures of support indeed compensate for lost income during the pandemic but have not been able to secure recipients' wealth at pre-COVID levels. The Russian Federation had already experienced an economic slowdown at the end of 2019 due to the economic crisis, which caused a decline in the population's income (Zubarevich and Safronov 2020). The pandemic only exacerbated this trend.

There are two main strategies for adapting to economic crises in Russian regions, according to Natalia Zubarevich (2020, p. 9): more intensive usage of part-time employment and provision of unemployment benefits. Unemployment measures have several effects. As a result of the increase in unemployment benefits and the simplification of registration procedures, the number of people turning to public employment agencies increased by 250% in June 2020 in comparison to February 2020. The unemployment rate increased from 4.6% (3.5 million people) to 6% (45 million) compared with early 2019 (Zubarevich and Safronov 2020, p. 6).²

Russian experts have found that expenditure on health care grew from 4% of GDP in 2019 to 6.5% in

2 There are several methodologies for evaluating unemployment in Russia. The one used in these calculations is the methodology recommended by the International Labour Organization.

2020, while social policy expenditures grew by only 0.6% compared with 2019 (to 31.8% of GDP in 2020). Since the majority of measures were financed from the federal budget, intergovernmental transfers increased from 5.5% in 2019 to 7.1% in 2020 (Analytic Bulletin 2020). The World Bank estimates that by May 2020, the Russian Federation had invested 1.4 trillion rubles in anti-crisis measures, constituting 1.2% of GDP (World Bank 2020). The International Monetary Fund estimates that Russian budgetary fiscal support to individuals and firms is now as high as 2.5% of GDP (IMF 2020a). This level of support is, however, still lower than in other OECD countries, where these investments are more than 10% of GDP. The overall cost of the fiscal package for individuals, business, and nonprofit organizations is estimated at 3.4% of GDP (IMF 2020b). This level of budgetary support is similar to that of other BRICS countries (Analytic Bulletin 2020, p. 49). Not only is government support only moderate, but there are also a huge number of cases in which individuals eligible for benefits had to fight for them. Even the pro-government movement “National Front” admits that a lot of effort has to be invested in order to obtain the promised benefits. Thus, even the scarce resources available do not always easily reach beneficiaries.

It is crucial to mention the rise of charitable activity in Russian society in response to the pandemic. In the very beginning, the government refused to admit that hospitals and other public health care providers were not sufficiently stocked with personal protective equipment. To solve this problem, the professional union “Alliance of Doctors” and other civic organizations engaged in fundraising to purchase and distribute the necessary equipment in Moscow city and other regions across Russia. The TV channel “Rain” (“Dozhd”) and the theatre “Gogol’ Center,” run by famous artistic director Kirill Sebebrennikov, were among those who arranged charity marathons. As Semenov and Bederson (2020) demonstrated, average monthly donations increased.

There have been talks about a possible decision by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection to prolong the above-mentioned temporary measures and make them permanent. However, there are no signs of any governmental measures to extend the measures adopted in the first months of the pandemic. As the economist Evgenii Gontmakher (2020) notes, all the fixed-term measures introduced (most of them intended just for April–June 2020) ended on October 1 and current governmental rhetoric sees the pandemic as a short-term crisis, neglecting its long-term consequences in many policy spheres. The position of the federal government can be partially explained and supported by the official data on new infections and deaths, which put them at a relatively low level. Yet the official data have been called into question by international and domestic experts alike (New York

Times, Financial Times). In light of the political goal of approving the new Constitution, experts suggest that the reporting this summer was politically motivated. An insufficient supply of COVID-19 tests also accounts in part for relatively positive official reports. In addition to that explanation, Cook and Twigg (2020) assume that particularities of statistics-gathering and criteria for causes of death differ from global standards, which would explain the comparatively low fatality rate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three main particularities of the governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia. First, the dynamics of the political regime in Russia as well as particularities of its territorial composition and power vertical help to explain policy responses. Responsibility for containing the pandemic was forced on the regional authorities, which are political and financially dependent on the central government. This configuration of federal-regional relations inhibits the ability to contain the pandemic because the existing highly centralized system has never encouraged regional initiatives and only required compliance with federal policy goals. The responsibility for coping with the pandemic took many regional authorities by surprise, challenging their capacity to act independently and efficiently on their own. In some cases (e.g., the Republic of Dagestan), this led to a total policy failure. In addition, the desire to get the new Constitution—mainly aimed at allowing the current president to maintain power—adopted seems to have driven the political process, distracting the political leadership from taking prompt preventive measures at the very beginning of the pandemic. The All-Russian voting day on the new Constitution was a clear sign of prioritization of the political goal of keeping the president in power in the future over the social policy goal of ensuring the health and wealth of the population.

Second, the dominance of executive power over legislative power meant that the main social benefits and unplanned budget spending were introduced by presidential proclamations and later elaborated in presidential and governmental decrees, as well as in federal legislation. The presence of demographic growth on the presidential political agenda accounts for the support measures introduced for various categories of families with children.

Third, the long-existing categorization of various groups of beneficiaries (doctors versus junior health care personnel, families with children of varying age, etc.) who are eligible for different levels of state support persists. This differentiation creates unequal support and social tension, producing grounds for manipulation with the goal of obtaining “more privileged” status to obtain better benefits. Path-dependence accounts for the appearance of categorical provision during the pandemic instead

of means-testing. All the measures that have been introduced are temporary, demonstrating that the government

sees the pandemic as a short-term crisis and neglects its long-term consequences in many policy spheres.

About the Author

Anna Tarasenko has a political science background and holds a PhD in Political Science with a research focus on the development of the nonprofit sector in Russia. She works for the National Research University Higher School of Economics (St. Petersburg Campus) as Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations and Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Comparative Governance Studies.

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