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COVID-19 in Russia's Arctic

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Abstract:

This article lays out the broad dimensions of Russia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and then shows how these policies affected developments in the Arctic. The Kremlin initially denied that the disease would be a problem and then, when such denials were no longer tenable, has sought to minimize reports of its impact through pressure on doctors and journalists. Several doctors have died in mysterious circumstances. The Arctic has not been immune from the disease, with outbreaks coming from migrant workers building new energy infrastructure.

COVID Comes to Russia

A pandemic reminiscent of the Spanish Influenza, the novel coronavirus has wreaked havoc and destruction. What began as a small outbreak in the little-known city of Wuhan, China, soon grew to be a world-wide pandemic. As hospital beds grew overcrowded and medical supplies ran short, countries across the globe have responded in different ways to counter the effects of this disease. Some have been more successful than others. Russia has been one of the worst performers.

The Kremlin has been actively involved in censoring coverage of Russian healthcare and the status of the coronavirus within its borders. This unwillingness to provide objective information has resulted in the death of many citizens, arrest of doctors and journalists, and propaganda campaigns initially denying the severity of the disease.

Russia's policy regarding COVID-19 began with initial denial and censorship. Underdeveloped and underfunded healthcare exacerbated the problem. The Kremlin has targeted and attacked doctors and activists who have exposed gaps in Russia's healthcare, and its inability to cope with the strains brought on by the pandemic. Ineffective policies have exacerbated the spread of the disease as well. Finally, the Kremlin has engaged in hacking and corrupt behavior to make it appear as if the Russian

government has been handling the pandemic effectively and responsibly. Russia's difficulties with the pandemic unfolded as Russian president Vladimir Putin sought public approval of his decision to rewrite the Russian constitution with the goal of formally extending his rule from 2024 to 2036.¹

Initial Denial and Censorship

The Kremlin has actively denied the severity of COVID-19. As the world began to recognize the seriousness of the problem in March, various Russian-backed sources argued that the coronavirus was a lie spread by American "Big Pharma." The Pentagon has since published reports exposing China and Russia as having been engaged in disinformation campaigns regarding COVID-19.² RT, formerly known as Russia Today, and Sputnik Radio spread various conspiracy theories, while insisting that Russia and China were acting as "responsible powers."³ In early March, pro-Kremlin Russian news sources argued that the coronavirus itself was part of a foreign disinformation campaign.⁴ An EU watchdog organization which tracks disinformation campaigns reported on 1 April that various pro-Kremlin social media accounts were saying that the EU was on the verge of collapsing and therefore unable to deal with the coronavirus.⁵ While downplaying the severity of the virus

1 Maxim Rodionov, "Constitutional changes the 'right thing' for Russia: Putin," Reuters, July 5, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-constitution/constitutional-changes-are-the-right-thing-for-russia-putin-idUSKBN2460OD>

2 Matthew Cox, "Russia and China are Spreading Lies about Coronavirus, Pentagon Says," Military.Com, April 10, 2020, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/04/10/russia-and-china-are-spreading-lies-about-coronavirus-pentagon-says.html>

3 Wesolowsky, Tony, "Here's Why The Numbers Don't Tell The Real Story Of The Coronavirus Pandemic," RadioFreeEuropeRadioLiberty, April 03, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/here-s-why-the-numbers-don-t-necessarily-tell-the-true-story-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic/30526920.html>

4 Dmitry Smirnov, twitter, March 04, 2020, <https://twitter.com/dimsmirnov175/status/1235156424281542660>, Ivan Belyiev, "Отрицать до последнего: Рунет о коронавирусе и политике Кремля," Radio Svoboda, March 5, 2020, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30468832.html>, and Campbell, Eric, "The doctor who defied Russia's strongman," Foreign Correspondent, June 02, 2020 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-02/anastasia-vasilyeva-doctors-alliance-russia-coronavirus/12276094?nw=0>

5 Wesolowsky, Tony, "Here's Why The Numbers Don't Tell The Real Story Of The Coronavirus Pandemic," RadioFreeEuropeRadioLiberty, April 03, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/here-s-why-the-numbers-don-t-necessarily-tell-the-true-story-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic/30526920.html>

inside Russia's borders, the Kremlin also seized the pandemic as an opportunity to undermine the European Union. From the outbreak of the disease the Kremlin has sought to propagate the narrative that the coronavirus was part of a Western disinformation campaign created to sow panic and discord. At the same time, the Kremlin has actively suppressed statistics and information related to the pandemic to promote this narrative.

In addition to statements made by pro-Kremlin journalists and politicians, the Russian government has also taken concrete legislative action limiting discussion around the pandemic. In March, The Russian Federal Security Service took down a viral post which stated that the true number of COVID-19 cases had reached over 20,000.⁶ By 1 April, the Russian Supreme Court declared spreading "false information" about COVID illegal, stating that the punishment for doing so would be five years in prison.⁷ Since this ruling, over 20 websites and 80 watchdog groups were blocked for publishing "fake news."⁸

The Russian government has actively hidden the true number of patients infected with coronavirus, casting doubt on the statistics published by Russian organizations. By June 2020, there was considerable controversy over how the Russian government was reporting on the coronavirus. Both the Financial Times and the New York Times accused the Kremlin of purposefully underreporting cases of COVID, to make it appear as if the government had everything under control. Among the deceptions was reporting coronavirus cases as "pneumonia." The Russian Foreign Ministry stated that these allegations were themselves "disinformation."⁹

Hiding the Ineffectiveness of Russia's Healthcare System

Much of the Kremlin's propaganda functions not only to hide the severity of the coronavirus, but also mask

widespread problems with the Russian healthcare system. This pandemic has exposed problems created by a lack of reforms, as well as failures to provide sufficient medicines, medical equipment, and funding. There have even been instances in which outdated ventilators burst into flames, killing patients.¹⁰ According to data from the Russian Ministry of Health, as of May, Russian doctors were nine times more likely to die from COVID-19 than doctors from Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, and Iran.¹¹ Failures in Russia's healthcare have negatively affected doctors and patients alike. There have been various firsthand accounts by journalists and doctors complaining about the lack of medical supplies, face masks, and protective equipment.

The death of Russian journalist Anastasia Petrova marks the devastating consequences of negligence and medical malpractice.¹² Petrova died from the coronavirus in March and documented her experience of seeking medical help on Facebook. When Petrova was experiencing symptoms, she went to the hospital and was told she was fine. The doctors refused to see her, and after Petrova left, the hospital refused to take her calls or test her for the coronavirus. On Facebook, Petrova wrote, "They have no instructions about where to take people or how... No one has a clear idea about anything." She later went to a second hospital and died while on a ventilator on March 31. While having tested positive for the virus at the second hospital, authorities declared Petrova to have died of pneumonia.¹³

As time progressed and the Kremlin could no longer deny the presence of the virus, the Russian government targeted and censored its online critics, limiting independent press reporting on COVID. Sergey Kovalchenko and Galina Artemenko are journalists who work for the St. Petersburg publication, "Mr7." On May 27, Kovalchenko stated that Facebook blocked his articles related to COVID.¹⁴ Artemenko took to Facebook say-

6 Wesolowsky, Tony, "Here's Why The Numbers Don't Tell The Real Story Of The Coronavirus Pandemic," RadioFreeEuropeRadioLiberty, April 03, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/here-s-why-the-numbers-don-t-necessarily-tell-the-true-story-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic/30526920.html>

7 "Russia Bans 'Discussions' of Fake Coronavirus News," The Moscow Times, April 23, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/23/russia-bans-discussions-of-fake-coronavirus-news-a70083>

8 Ibid

9 Alexandria Odynova, "New data suggest Russia may have a lot more COVID-19 deaths than it says it has," CBS, June 11, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-in-russia-deaths-could-be-much-higher-than-official-tally-new-data-from-moscow-suggest/> and Alexandria Odynova, "Russia slams The New York Times and Financial Times over coronavirus death toll reports," CBS, May 15, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-slams-the-new-york-times-financial-times-over-coronavirus-death-toll-reports/>

10 Clara Ferreira Marques, "How Putin's Russia Bungled the Pandemic," Bloomberg, May 19, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-05-19/how-vladimir-putin-s-russia-bungled-the-coronavirus>

11 Максим Литаврин, "Минздрав признал гибель 101 медика. По этим данным, российские врачи умирают от коронавируса почти в 9 раз чаще, чем в других странах," MediaZona, May 27, 2020, <https://zona.media/article/2020/05/27/acceptance>

12 Kuroptev, Yury and Robert Coalson, "They Don't Like How I'm Breathing": Russian Journalist Documents Her Coronavirus-Related Death," RFERL, April 07, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/they-don-t-like-how-i-m-breathing-russian-journalist-documents-her-coronavirus-related-death/30538929.html>

13 Ibid

14 <https://www.facebook.com/kovalchenkos/posts/3150789581645595>

ing that their articles were labeled as “spam” when, in reality, they were exposes describing overcrowded hospitals in St. Petersburg.¹⁵ These articles explained how doctors in St. Petersburg were underpaid, had little access to PPE, and were becoming sick on the job.¹⁶ Doctors and journalists who have exposed gaps in Russia’s healthcare system have also been the target of abuse, arrest, and harassment by the government.

Attacks on Doctors and Journalists

On April 2, 2020, Russian doctor Anastasia Vasilieva was arrested for challenging official COVID-19 figures reported by the government.¹⁷ Vasilieva is the head of a medical union called the Alliance of Doctors, which exposes the conditions of Russia’s hospitals and healthcare system. She has routinely accused Putin and the Russian government of lying about the state of COVID in the country and has used social media and the union’s website to deliver her message.

Deemed a liar by Russian state media, Vasilieva and her union posted videos on their website of doctors providing testimonials saying that they were ill equipped with protective gear, and that Russian hospitals were not prepared to deal with this crisis. These statements contradicted the Kremlin’s narrative. Vasilieva’s work exposed that the Kremlin did not have the situation under control.

Vasilieva was arrested on 2 April, after driving to a small town in Novgorod Oblast to deliver medical equipment. Police detained her on charges of violating “self-isolation rules” despite having all necessary documents required for travel.¹⁸ This arrest occurred one day after Putin signed an amendment to the Russian Criminal Code against spreading “fake news” about the virus.¹⁹

A few days later, Russian authorities arrested St. Petersburg activist Anna Shushpanova for document-

ing the state of COVID in the Russian Federation. Investigators searched Shushpanova’s apartment on 3 April and took her computer and phone. These actions came immediately after Shushpanova posted on VKontakte concerns of inadequate quarantine measures in a hospital and clinic in Sestroretsk.²⁰ The investigation was considered the Kremlin’s first application of the criminal code in reporting on the virus.²¹

As time progressed, censorship policies grew more severe. In May, Doctor Alexander Shulepov fell from a third story window after making a video about the lack of hospital supplies in treating COVID. Shulepov stated that despite being diagnosed with COVID, he was forced to keep working, and that he and colleagues were warning others about shortages of PPE in Voronezh. Shulepov was the third doctor who mysteriously fell out a window after exposing the lack of hospital supplies and inadequate treatment.²²

COVID in Russia’s Arctic Cities

Within the context of the abdication of national leadership and a campaign of misinformation, regional leaders, such as those in the Arctic, have been forced to act on their own. Norilsk Mayor Rinat Akhmetchin accused local authorities of underreporting coronavirus cases in the region by at least 200% on July 16.²³ While only 293 cases have been reported, Akhmetchin stated that, in fact, there were at least 832 cases. Despite Akhmetchin’s attempts to notify regional authorities, Krasnoyarsk health officials ignored his statements, saying that there was no need for intervention. After declining in Moscow, coronavirus spread through other regions, posing a threat for Russia’s Arctic cities.²⁴

Many of the cases of COVID in the Russian Arctic have been brought in from mainland Russia and have been spread by various oil and gas companies.²⁵ The city

15 “Facebook is not your Friend,” *The Russian Reader*, May 20, 2020, <https://therussianreader.com/tag/galina-artemenko>

16 “Петербургское издание MR7 заблокировали в фейсбуке после массовых жалоб на статьи про коронавирус” (St. Petersburg publication from Mr7 was blocked on facebook after publishing an article about coronavirus,) *mediazona*, May 27, 2020, <https://zona.media/news/2020/05/27/mr7>

17 “Russian Doctor Detained after Challenging Virus Figures,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/world/europe/russian-virus-doctor-detained.html>

18 Campbell, Eric, “The doctor who defied Russia’s strongman,” *Foreign Correspondent*, June 02, 2020 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-02/anastasia-vasilyeva-doctors-alliance-russia-coronavirus/12276094?nw=0>

19 Todd Prince, “Russian Activist Says She’s Hit By First Investigation Under ‘Fake’ Coronavirus News Law,” *RFERL*, April 05, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-activist-says-she-s-hit-by-first-investigation-under-fake-coronavirus-news-law/30532116.html>

20 Todd Prince, “Russian Activist Says She’s Hit By First Investigation Under ‘Fake’ Coronavirus News Law,” *RFERL*, April 05, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-activist-says-she-s-hit-by-first-investigation-under-fake-coronavirus-news-law/30532116.html>

21 *Ibid*

22 Will Stewart and Henry Martin, “Third Russian doctor plunges from Covid hospital window...” *Dailymail*, May 03, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8282033/Third-Russian-doctor-plunges-coronavirus-hospital-window.html>

23 “Arctic Mayor Claims Coronavirus Cases 200% Higher Than Official Count,” *The Moscow Times*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/07/16/arctic-mayor-claims-coronavirus-cases-200-higher-than-official-count-a70903>

24 *Ibid*.

25 Joshua Yaffa, “Remote, Forbidding, and Infected: The Coronavirus Is Spreading in the Russian Arctic,” *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/remote-forbidding-and-infected-the-coronavirus-is-spreading-in-the-russian-arctic>

of Belokamenka in Murmansk Oblast is home to the Kola Yard liquefied natural gas project. Beginning in 2017, Novatek employs about 9,000 to 10,000 employees on the project, many of whom are migrant workers from Turkey and the Central Asian states.²⁶ Since April, there have been over 2,000 cases of COVID in Belokamenka. This remote region has only limited access to necessary medical equipment and other resources.²⁷ Family members of infected workers stated that not only did Kola Yard fail to provide workers with hand sanitizers and gloves, but the migrant workers were forced to live in cramped dormitories, unable to maintain appropriate social distancing.²⁸ Despite extensive publicity on social media from workers and residents about these conditions, Novatek declined to comment on the matter.

Federal authorities began paying more attention to this Arctic city thanks to the social media attention it generated. The federal watchdog organization “Rospotrebnadzor” came to the site and gave workers masks and gloves.²⁹ By mid-April, hundreds were infected, and a field hospital was built. Patients were also dispatched to hospitals in the larger cities of Novy Urengoy and Salekhard.³⁰ Despite the infections, by mid-June, the governor of Murmansk, Andrei Chibis, reduced many of the restrictions.³¹

About the Author

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While the case in Belokamenka is among the most dire, other Russian Arctic cities in Yakutia and Siberia have also been hit by the pandemic. In late April, several workers at the Chayanda natural-gas field in Yakutia were diagnosed with the coronavirus.³² The Sabetta Port of the Kara Sea, which transfers and receives liquefied natural gas from the Yamal Peninsula, has also seen various COVID-19 cases.³³ By May, Severodvinsk, a city in the Arkhangelsk Oblast, saw a drastic increase in COVID cases.³⁴ As of June, the Murmansk region remains the most heavily-hit region in the Russian Arctic. By 21 June, there were 188 cases in Apatity, 291 cases in Monchegorsk, and 114 cases in Kirovsk. Many trace these cases to the Kola Yard project in Belokamenka.³⁵

Indigenous people make up a prominent part of the Arctic population. According to reports from the Arctic Council, the Indigenous populations of the Russian Arctic are considered an especially vulnerable group to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those in the Yamal Nenets Okrug are at especially high risk.³⁶ The Indigenous elders have strong memories of the 1918 pandemic and have largely avoided contact with towns, relying on traditional ways to feed themselves.³⁷ However, even with these precautions, the trade restrictions associated with the pandemic have negatively affected the Indigenous economy as well.³⁸

- 26 Aleksandr Andreyevsky, Anton Nekayev, and Robert Coalson, “Despite a Mass COVID-19 Outbreak, Workers in Russia’s Arctic Labor On,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, May 12, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/despite-a-mass-covid-19-outbreak-workers-in-russia-s-arctic-labor-on-/30608114.html>
- 27 Aleksandr Andreyevsky, Anton Nekayev, and Robert Coalson, “Despite a Mass COVID-19 Outbreak, Workers in Russia’s Arctic Labor On,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, May 12, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/despite-a-mass-covid-19-outbreak-workers-in-russia-s-arctic-labor-on-/30608114.html>
- 28 Ibid
- 29 Joshua Yaffa, “Remote, Forbidding, and Infected: The Coronavirus Is Spreading in the Russian Arctic,” *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/remote-forbidding-and-infected-the-coronavirus-is-spreading-in-the-russian-arctic>
- 30 Ibid
- 31 Thomas Nilsen, “Murmansk sees coronavirus cases spike as governor lifts restrictions,” *The Barents Observer*, June 21, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2020/06/murmansk-sees-coronavirus-causes-spike-governor-lifts-restrictions>
- 32 Ibid
- 33 Ibid
- 34 Atle Staalsen, “Closed military naval town in Russian Arctic sees major increase in COVID-19 cases,” *Eye on the Arctic*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2020/05/26/closed-military-naval-town-in-russian-arctic-sees-major-increase-in-covid-19-cases/>
- 35 Thomas Nilsen, “Murmansk sees coronavirus cases spike as governor lifts restrictions,” *The Barents Observer*, June 21, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2020/06/murmansk-sees-coronavirus-causes-spike-governor-lifts-restrictions>
- 36 “The Impact of Covid-19 on Indigenous Peoples Living in the Russian Arctic,” *The Arctic Council*, July 16, 2020, <https://arctic-council.org/en/news/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-indigenous-peoples-living-in-the-russian-arctic/>
- 37 “The Impact of Covid-19 on Indigenous Peoples Living in the Russian Arctic,” *The Arctic Council*, July 16, 2020, <https://arctic-council.org/en/news/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-indigenous-peoples-living-in-the-russian-arctic/>
- 38 “Covid-19 in the Arctic: Briefing Document for Senior Arctic Officials Senior Arctic Officials’ executive meeting Iceland,” *The Arctic Council*, June 24 and 25, 2020, <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/2473>, 38.