

Russian Governmentality and COVID-19

The central problematic of the COVID-19 crisis all over the world emerged as the relationship between the state and its people. During the first months of the current health crisis in Russia, the nature of these relationships were exposed in ways previously unseen, reminding us that in the expected crisis moment, in the calculation of costs and benefits, those who endure the costs are not the same as those who bear the benefits.

The events of the last months demonstrated that many countries, including Russia, initially faced the choice to move to prevent crisis, or to prevent the knowledge about the upcoming crisis from spreading.

Russian political leadership chose to pursue the discourse of reassurance before rapidly switching to the emergency measures, led by Moscow's lockdown on March 30 (almost three months after the first case). By April 2, more than 1/3 of the administrative regions of Russia reported cases of COVID-19, raising the official statistics to three and a half thousand cases in the whole country.

One week before the Moscow lockdown, a senior official from the Ministry of Health, when denying that Russia is underreporting numbers, stated that "all relevant medical institutions and agencies of Russia are ready, well-coordinated and well-prepared for the Covid-19 outbreak." In her attempt to reassure the public she evoked the welfare system of the USSR, implying that the USSR-built healthcare institutions and practices could be mobilized to fight COVID-19¹.

Here, it is helpful to remember that these statements were made after the nation-wide protest of medical professionals against layoffs in late November² and the publication of data about the stark decline in the number of doctors and nurses in 53 regions of the country³ with no first response medical personnel in about 500 townships all over Russia.

Rarely other instances of reassurance derived its legitimacy from the socialist principles, but an absolute majority of the initial official rhetoric assumed an anti-market, anti-liberal pretext, postponing taking real measures, except for ones implying the calculation of projected costs of the declining demand of Russian energy resources due to falling production in China⁴. As such, beginning early February, Russian President Putin made a number of statements about taking away licenses from the pharmacies that inflate prices on masks⁵, while the Deputy Prime Minister Golikova, when talking about evacuating Russian citizens from the zones of virus's outbreak claimed "We are not leaving our people behind."⁶

After the state had to officially acknowledge the necessity of taking politically and economically costly measures in early April, the conversation about responsibility acquired yet another new direction. However, this new rhetoric and strategy was borrowed from a somewhat older repertoire. This new direction implied an important shift from reassurance and representation of state as taking responsibility for protecting citizens towards the attitude of insistence on self-reliance - a move back to rhetoric of liberalism.

¹ <http://www.mgzt.ru/12-ot-25-marta-2020-g/elena-malinnikova-luchshaya-profilaktika-razobshchenie>

² https://www.dp.ru/a/2019/11/30/Vserossijskaja_akcija_prote

³ <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2019/10/31/12787004.shtml?updated>

⁴ https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4241513?from=main_2

⁵ <https://regnum.ru/news/2849945.html>, <https://ria.ru/20200205/1564287291.html>

⁶ <https://regnum.ru/news/2849945.html>, <https://ria.ru/20200205/1564287291.html>

In late April⁷, when the curve of new Covid-19 infections all over Russia started getting as steep as in Moscow, the representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in her interview, related an opinion claiming that foreign travel became too accessible for Russian citizens, particularly those without connections and means. (In the beginning of April 25K Russian citizens, most of whom were tourists, remained abroad⁸). The official called such overseas traveling “risky and irresponsible” both personally and towards the Russian government. The emphasis on social and economic privilege which emanated from her statements evoked public resonance and outrage⁹.

The same pervasive pattern of reallocating responsibility and redistributing risks assumed different forms and took place on different political and discursive levels during the outbreak of the virus in Russia.

The redistribution of responsibility that we have seen, for example, by the President in early April¹⁰ giving governors of the Russian administrative regions the rights to decide on the measures, after months of suppressing the information about cases, represents a method of redistribution of responsibility from top down, with the purpose of potentially scapegoating, public censuring, or even deposing the officials below the President. This is often done to reduce the government’s political risks and boost the president’s rating.

The practice predates Putin’s now two decades in power, but was arguably ritualized and refined during his multiple terms. As such the appointment of Sergey Kirienko, a relatively young and unknown political actor, to the office of prime-minister weeks before Russian economy collapsed in 1998, only to depose him exactly four months after is, in its nature, the same political move as giving regions sanction to decide on their needs in combatting COVID-19 crisis in 2020, then subsequently, a week later, publicly chastising the governors about their abuse of power.

As Slavoj Žižek argues it in his book *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World* (2020)¹¹, freedom of speech and trust between governments and their people proved to be critical for the prevention of the health crises all over the world. These two components, freedom of speech and trust, seem to be quite often lacking.

The main question to be asked here is why would some governments choose to prevent the spreading of the knowledge about the growing number of cases of COVID-19 infection and the resulting expanding of the scale of the problem, rather than moving to prevent the ongoing health and welfare crises from taking hold over their nations?

Yet, amid this rapidly developing situation, one of the central themes of the reaction of the Russian government to the ongoing pandemic was the redistribution of its own political risks. Michel Foucault in his essay on “governmentality”¹² wrote that the problematic of government at a time of political modernity revolves around deployment of “range of multiform tactics” that constitute mechanisms of control of the population that are driven by the apparatus of the state.

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-51979104>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-52155198>

⁹ <https://profi.travel/news/46274/details>

¹⁰ <https://ria.ru/20200406/1569658731.html> <https://ria.ru/20200406/1569626316.html>

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek. 2020. *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*. Polity.

¹² Michel Foucault (1991/1978 orig.). “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect*, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 87-104.

However, we now see that the rationality of the government that represses information about the spread of virus, in our case- Russian state- proves to be somewhat different.

Russian governmentality has not been about the relationship between the government and its people, whether it is based on people trust while sustaining the democracy and legitimacy – aspired to by Žižek, or bureaucratic machine ordering the population for the sake of insuring durability of the state.

The rationality of Russian government diverges from both in so much as it seeks to ensure “the right” distribution of the power among different institutions of its government, and the ability of the President to quickly redistribute political responsibility among different executive and administrative levels.