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Russia’s 'Special Path' Won’t Protect it From the Coronavirus

Logic dictates that the pandemic will soon overwhelm Russia too.

By Ilya Shepelin

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

The coronavirus storm that has overwhelmed the countries of Europe has not yet sucked Russia in. The Ostankino television channels are observing the West’s struggles to deal with the epidemic with a satisfaction bordering on lechery.

Italians are practically dying live on air, the streets of its tourist cities are deserted, and its famed gastrobars are shuttered. The European Union is splitting at the seams as old allies with shared democratic values fail to come to each other’s aid. This news is the best possible accompaniment to slogans that Russia has its own special path and that everyone must support it by voting for Putin’s new constitution — otherwise, chaos and pestilence await us.

It is a pity that we cannot put this moment on pause. Logic dictates that the pandemic will

soon overwhelm Russia too. For the time being, Moscow has the opportunity to enjoy the moment: to go over to the window and watch the hurricane smashing its neighbors' houses into splinters. To continue the analogy, Russia has preferred to shut the window and admire the hurricane from its seat on the windowsill, but soon this storm is bound to reach its window too.

For the last week, an "optional" quarantine has essentially been in place. If you want to send your kids to school — go ahead. If you want to work without leaving home and you can do so — go ahead. The government has deliberately avoided issuing any absolute directives, in order not to reduce economic activity and lose income. Flights to Europe were only blocked a few days ago, though you can still freely cruise between cities all over the vast territory of Russia itself, to places where the virus is present and places where it isn't.

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There is also a feeling that if Russians had not seen events in Europe and what measures are being taken there live on TV, then we would not have begun to prepare on a large scale for the coronavirus and speak publicly about it in this country. All problems are solved as they occur. If yesterday we officially had fewer than 100 cases, then no quarantine should be declared — it will cost the state money and sow panic.

When (if) the virus acquires the status of an epidemic in Russia, the authorities will limit internal flights and place entire cities under quarantine.

In respectable parlance, these measures could be called hope for *avos* ("divine providence") for Russia. If we opt not to use the language of fairy tales, then the word is *raspizd**stvo*, but let's call it carelessness.

For a coronavirus epidemic not to occur in Russia, schools should have been closed two weeks ago (even now they still haven't been closed – this will happen only on Saturday), along with shutting off air connections with other countries and restricting internal travel.

But this strategy, which could be termed carelessness, is not the worst of the possible options. In Italy the coronavirus caused panic and a public onslaught on the health system, which was completely unprepared. If there is no panic, there is none of the resulting crisis.

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Products have already started to vanish from Russian shelves, but fairly slowly — and it appears that this is more a case of people succumbing to the panic shown by buyers in Western countries. Videos of kilometer-long lines for supermarkets are reaching Russia from the U.S., bypassing state borders.

As long as everything remains the way it is, you could say that this strategy of carelessness produces a practical result of which the Kremlin's propagandists can be proud. But there are absolutely no guarantees that panic won't boil over when (if) the number of infected begins to

rise in geometric progression.

If in the upcoming week an epidemic really does begin, forcing the Kremlin to postpone voting on Putin's new constitution, it will result in one of the greatest paradoxes of Russia's "Special Path."

The pride of authoritarian regimes is that they do not need to take populist decisions. Such regimes do not need to curry favor with the electorate in order to take decisions that are unpopular but useful for the country.

However, the nature of Putin's regime is such that he is able to take unpopular decisions only when it comes to maintaining the wealth of the oligarchs that surround him. In this case he can take the money from the pension savings of millions of Russians.

But this regime does not have the strength or will to introduce early quarantine and limit the population's economic activity in order to avoid a global epidemic.

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