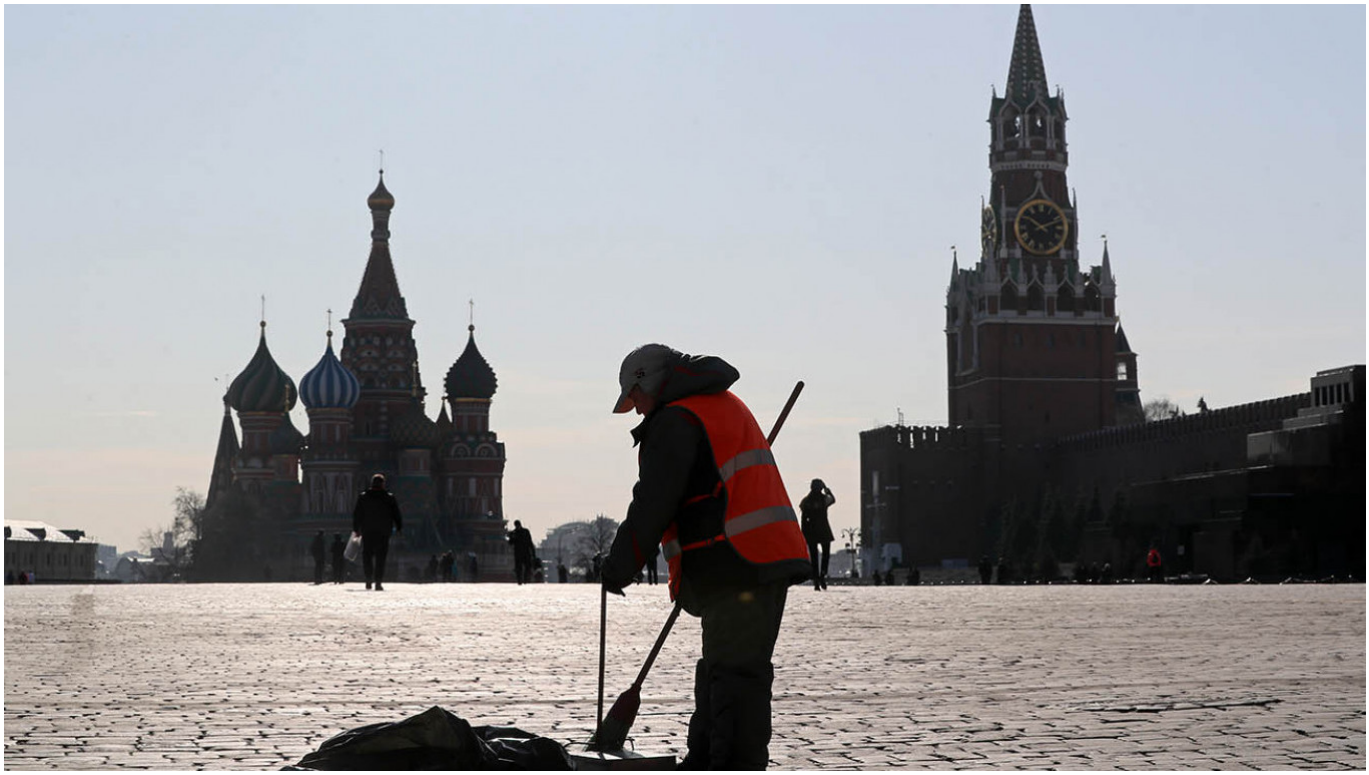
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Russia Sees Its Worldview Vindicated in the Age of Coronavirus

As the Kremlin prepares to manage the public health emergency and an economic slowdown, it's coming to view the global disarray as affirmation of its ideology.

By Dmitry Trenin

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Alexander Shcherbak / TASS

With at least 253 confirmed cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, Russia is beginning to confront the public health and economic effects of its rapid spread. Despite the emerging challenges, however, the Kremlin believes the shortcomings of the international response have validated key aspects of its worldview.

The virus's outbreak has become a major test for all governments. Russian authorities must compete in real time with the rest of the world, in a still fairly open information space. They have faced criticism for dragging their feet before evacuating Russian nationals out of Wuhan,

China, and for not taking effective measures inside Russia. As the epidemic escalates, comparisons with other countries are inevitable; people are watching and will draw conclusions.

Moscow has walked a tightrope in managing relations with Beijing, especially after shocking China by closing their shared 4,300-kilometer border. Russian officials' attempts to screen Chinese tourists in Moscow for the coronavirus drew a similarly angry protest from the Chinese Embassy.

However, after Russia insulated itself physically and Chinese visitors had departed, Moscow began to extoll China's response to the virus. Russia has further sided with China in its coronavirus messaging war with the United States, perpetuating Beijing's claims that the virus is a U.S. biological weapon deployed to stop China's rise. Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping spoke on the phone and agreed to cooperate more closely on medical research.

Russia has had to distance itself from other neighbors as well. Moscow led the way in reestablishing border controls within what is formally called a union state with Belarus, in light of Minsk's refusal to close its borders to Chinese visitors and other foreigners who might be infected. The Russian move provoked Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to criticize Russia for heavy-handedness.

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After Ukraine closed all its borders, Russia suspended rail service between the two countries, severing their last remaining transport link. Georgia, for its part, closed its borders to Russian nationals. Finally, Russia placed a ban on most foreign visitors.

Another destabilizing by-product of the coronavirus outbreak is heightened doubt about U.S. President Donald Trump's reelection prospects. Just before the virus struck, most Russian analysts were predicting a victory for him in November — a reassuring result for the Kremlin that considers him a comfortable counterpart. Now the outcome of the election is seen as wide open, with the possibility of Democrat and former vice president Joe Biden winning the White House. If that happens, it would introduce further uncertainty into U.S.-Russia relations.

Other major concerns for Russia stem from the steep plunge in the price of oil and the fall of the Russian ruble. Against a backdrop of general economic gloom, the collapse of the agreement on oil production levels between Russia and OPEC sent the price to its lowest levels since 2003. While Russia has amassed substantial reserves to cushion the blow to its budget, its more ambitious national projects in various areas, including healthcare, will come under strain.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin sees some effects of the outbreak as validating the correctness of its worldview. The fragility of globalism has been underscored as the international community grows more fractious and the liberal order recedes. The state has reasserted itself as the prime actor on the global scene. International institutions like the World Health Organization have become mere statisticians, and even the EU has taken a back seat to the governments of member states.

The world's democracies are not faring better in the crisis than nondemocracies. The efforts of states with greater capacity for mobilization, such as China, South Korea, and Japan, are proving to be much more effective than those initiated by states with a looser social organization — like the United States, for example, and European countries that have come to rely on others but now face newly erected border barriers.

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The weaknesses of the EU have been laid particularly bare. Virtually all known cases of the virus in Russia originated in Europe (Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and Austria are among the most popular holiday destinations for Russian travelers). The lack of a coherent response from Brussels and the reemergence of internal border controls between EU countries has been read in Moscow as more proof that the EU is not coping with the challenges of the modern era.

Above all, Russia may interpret recent events as confirming the wisdom of self-reliance in a globalized world driven by individual countries' self-interests. Russia is now better prepared to deal with an economic crisis than it was in 2008 or 2014: it has larger currency reserves, lower external debt, and a lesser reliance on imports of food and other goods.

However, this crisis is still in its early stages in Russia. All levels of the government will have to perform well to support the Kremlin's bid on power ahead of the forthcoming constitutional vote, the parliamentary poll next year, and the presidential election of 2024.

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