The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

If Putin Wants to Use the Military Against the Coronavirus, He'll Need to Trust His Governors or Step up Himself

Will governors be granted the power to tell local military commanders what to do?

By Mark Galeotti

April 14, 2020



Donat Sorokin / TASS

The Covid-19 crisis is highlighting one of Putin's less inspiring traits — his willingness to let certain serious challenges become Someone Else's Problem.

Having first allowed himself to downplay the danger, dumping the job of responding to the issue on Sergei Sobyanin, mayor of Moscow (who did a pretty good job in Moscow, but lacked the authority outside his own turf), he then also threw the job at Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and essentially abdicated much of the federal responsibility by making it a gubernatorial mission.

On one level, it makes sense to pass responsibility to the governors given the scale of the country and the varying parameters of the problem.

St. Petersburg is going to face a different challenge from, say, Udmurtia. However, with responsibility must go power and resources, and this is where Putin seems unwilling to make good on his rhetoric.

This is a massively centralized system, with tax income flowing to the federal government and then being redistributed (in a massively unequal way). Although there has been talk of extra money, actually it looks as if the federal center is still very leery of passing governors the kind of resources they will need to do the unwelcome new job they have been given.

Little Green Doctors?

A similar mismatch between rhetoric and reality seems present in Putin's latest suggestion that people should "keep in mind that all the possibilities, including the capabilities of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, if necessary, of course, can and should be used here."

The Main Military Medical Directorate (GVMU) certainly represents an important source of potential assets, from more than 100,000 medical specialists and 23,000 doctors in 70 facilities to massive, wartime-level stocks of consumables such as gowns, facemasks and drugs. They also receive heightened training in operating in conditions of biological warfare, which should give them an edge in resisting infection themselves.

Yet so far they have been active in Italy, not Russia, beyond building new "multifunctional medical centers" Why?

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One of the reasons is that the legal and practical assumptions about Military Aid to the Civil Power operations in the Russian system is very much predicated on direction from the federal center. To be blunt, it assumes a wartime situation which is more about, shall we say, Civil Aid to the Military Power, in which local agencies are subsumed within a federally-directed wartime superstate.

So long as Putin doesn't want to dirty his hands (hey, he can always wash them) and those of the federal center with taking a direct responsibility for the effort — and, presumably, risking the blame when things go wrong — then the question of devoting military resources to a campaign led by local authorities poses a variety of thorny questions.

Will governors be granted the power to tell local military commanders what to do?

Will they be empowered to raid defense ministry stocks for civilian hospitals? If so, who will pay for them to be replenished afterwards?

When medical facilities are inside secure military facilities, will governors be allowed to send civilian patients into them?

Will military patients who are deemed less at risk be turfed off ventilators and out of wards to make way for civilians in more perilous conditions? (Likely to be a serious dilemma now that the defense ministry is admitting cases in its ranks — and the spring draft is still due to go ahead.)

These are just some of the very practical challenges in shucking responsibility for serious, all-of-government problems onto local satraps in a hyper-presidential system. Especially one in which the military — and the minister of defense in particular — are powerful, and jealous of their privileges.

Power and Responsibility

One answer would be to declare a State of Emergency under Article 88 of the Constitution. According to Article 17(1e) of the Federal Constitutional Law on a State of Emergency, that permits the use of the military (and other armed services) for "participation in the liquidation of emergency situations and salvation of human lives as part of the forces of the combined state system for prevention and liquidation of emergency situations."

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However, again the essence of the law is to tighten central control, not weaken it. Article 18(1) of the law states that, "To exercise uniform command and control of forces and means ensuring the regime of the state of emergency, the President of the Russian Federation by his decree shall appoint a commandant of the territory where the state of emergency is introduced." Not can, but will.

Of course, Putin could appoint governors as such commandants, which would be one neat way in which he could hand control of military assets to governors, but if we're honest, the issue has never been on of capacity but will. Putin doesn't want to become the Covid-tsar, but nor does he appear willing to empower his regional satraps on a massive scale, with the money, autonomy and control over federal institutions that would require.

Instead, he is just grumbling about "sloppiness" in the regions, in effect putting much of his legitimacy as president in the hands of his governors, without being able to give them the tools they need yet for it. The calculation may be that if need be, the governors can be blamed, but given how centralized this system has become, it is questionable how far a long-suffering Russian electorate will buy that.

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