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Why Showcase the Prime Minister's Illness on TV?

Russian citizens instinctively expect their leaders to lie to them during crises — just think "Chernobyl" — but the authorities now seem intent on proving that they are not hiding anything.

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Mikhail Mishustin **Kremlin.ru**

Russians watching state-controlled television witnessed an unusual spectacle on April 31. Like wooden actors in some grammar school drama, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin dutifully reported via video link to President Vladimir Putin that he had tested positive for Covid-19 and would go into self-isolation as a protection to his staff. He even recommended that Putin appoint Andrei Belousov to replace him temporarily. The scenario ended with Putin doing just that.

Why stage such a show?

Any other country in the world would have simply reported that the prime minister had fallen ill, had informed the president and had checked into the hospital. End of story. In Russia, though, nothing is ever that simple.

There had to be a reason why they trotted out Mishustin for this show. It means that in some Kremlin office with plush carpets and massive oak tables, senior officials debated the question and reached a weighty decision.

And they wanted to announce it Western-style, like an episode of "The Crown." For all appearances, it would be no different from British Prime Minister Boris Johnson informing Queen Elizabeth II that the coronavirus had left him temporarily indisposed.

But the Russian version did differ in at least one major way: the Kremlin authorities had spent the last 20 years convincing the people that their leaders are powerful, unaccountable to the public, and rock solidly enduring.

So why shatter that illusion now?

Before answering, we must ask whether this was the only such episode in recent days. No, it was not. These days, Russian officials regularly give public statements with something resembling transparency — as much as that is possible for people who have not practiced sincerity for a very long time.

It does seem that official statistics for the number of confirmed Covid-19 infections in Russia are accurate. Even though the figures do not include the sudden surge in deaths from pneumonia that are most likely attributable to the novel coronavirus, the overall progression of cases perfectly matches mathematical models predicting its spread — the same models that revealed the exact extent of ballot stuffing in previous elections.

Related article: Russian PM Mishustin Diagnosed With Coronavirus

After initially secluding himself in quasi-quarantine, Putin has begun making almost weekly appeals to the nation and conducting frequent live briefings. It is in this context that we should consider the announcement of Prime Minister Mishustin's illness.

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With tens of millions of Russians on lockdown and deprived of their livelihoods, it is clear that Kremlin leaders in that very same meeting decided not to pour fuel on this smoldering fire of constant irritation.

Russia's leaders are at a loss as to how to proceed with their Constitutional amendments and they are likely to face cheap oil prices and a weakened economy long after the pandemic subsides.

They either cannot or do not want to make direct payments to citizens suffering financial loss. So all they can do is at least try not to lie and to act like Boris Johnson with the queen. For

Putin and his pals, that is already a lot.

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