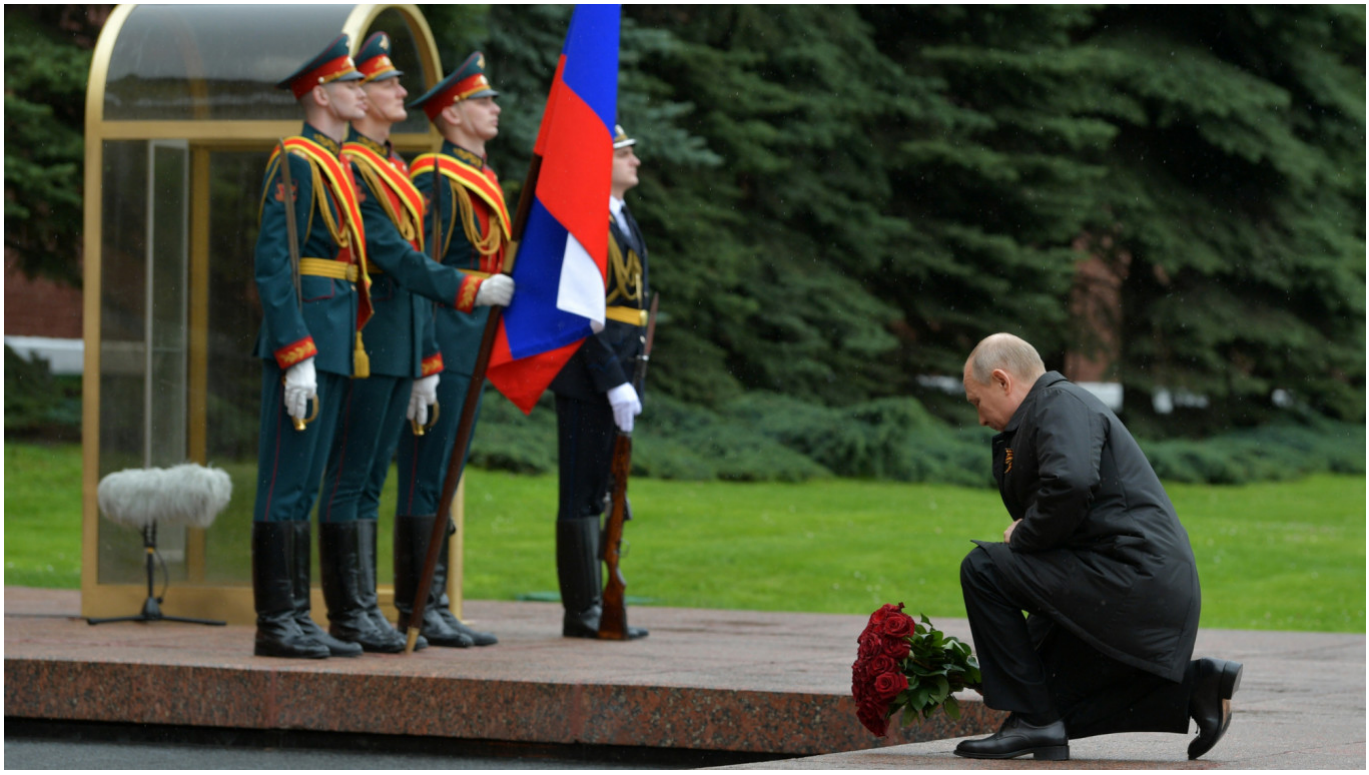
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Putin Calls for 'Invincible' Unity as Russians Mark Victory Day on Lockdown

By Michael Mainville for AFP

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Putin lays flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. **Alexei Druzhinin/TASS**

President Vladimir Putin told Russians they are "invincible" when they stand together as the country on Saturday marked the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II on lockdown from the coronavirus.

With the number of virus cases surging and authorities urging Russians to stay in their homes, celebrations of this year's Victory Day were muted after the Kremlin grudgingly agreed to postpone plans for a grand parade with world leaders.

Instead of columns of military hardware and thousands of troops parading through Red Square as planned, Putin walked alone to lay flowers at the Eternal Flame outside the red brick walls of the Kremlin.

In a solemn televised speech, he made no mention of the virus, despite Russia having the

fifth-highest number of confirmed infections in the world, with nearly 200,000 cases as of Saturday.

But Putin highlighted the sacrifices made by the Soviet Union in what Russians call the Great Patriotic War and hinted at the threat now facing the country.

"Our veterans fought for life, against death. And we will always be equal to their unity and endurance," Putin said.

"We know and firmly believe that we are invincible when we stand together."

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A ceremonial honour guard marched past Putin after his speech, as Russian television showed images of Red Square empty nearby.

Military helicopters, bombers and fighter jets then flew over the city, with some releasing smoke in the red, white and blue of the Russian flag over the Kremlin.

The pandemic hit Russia later than many countries in western Europe but it has seen a major increase in cases in recent days, with more than 10,000 new infections registered every day this week.

On Saturday officials said the number of confirmed infections had risen by 10,817 in the last 24 hours to reach a total of 198,676, putting Russia behind only the United States, Spain, Italy and Britain in total cases.

Russia says the increase is due in part to a huge testing campaign, with more than 5.2 million tests carried out so far.

The country's reported mortality rate is much lower than in many countries, with 1,827 dead from the coronavirus as of Saturday.

Officials credit a widespread testing and tracking effort, though critics have cast doubt on the numbers and accused authorities of under-reporting deaths.

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The pandemic has been a major blow to Putin's political plans for this spring.

The postponed Victory Day parade, which was due to be attended by world leaders including China's Xi Jinping and Emmanuel Macron of France, had been meant as a major showcase of Russia's increased global prestige under Putin.

The Russian leader was also forced to postpone a planned vote last month on constitutional reforms that would have paved the way for Putin, in power for more than 20 years, to potentially stay in the Kremlin until 2036.

Officials are hoping both events can still be held later this year, though no dates have been set and much will depend on when the outbreak comes under control.

As with others around the world, Russians are deeply worried about the long-term economic impact of the pandemic and polls show many are increasingly frustrated with the government's handling of the crisis.

One survey by independent pollster Levada this week showed Putin's approval rating falling to a historic low of 59 percent in April.

Authorities across the vast country have ordered a range of quarantine measures with Moscow, the epicentre of the epidemic, on a strict lockdown until the end of May.

Stay home

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin warned residents to stay home on Saturday and only watch ceremonies on television or the flyby from their balconies.

A popular event in which Russians walk in a parade holding photos of family members who fought in the war was also reorganised online.

While most ex-Soviet countries also remain under lockdown, two are going ahead with traditional military displays.

Belarus, where President Alexander Lukashenko has dismissed the dangers of the coronavirus, plans a parade involving some 5,000 troops.

"We cannot do otherwise," Lukashenko insisted Friday, likening his country to a wartime fortress withstanding the Nazis.

In Central Asia's Turkmenistan, which has reported no cases, a military parade will be held in front of a war memorial in the capital Ashgabat.

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