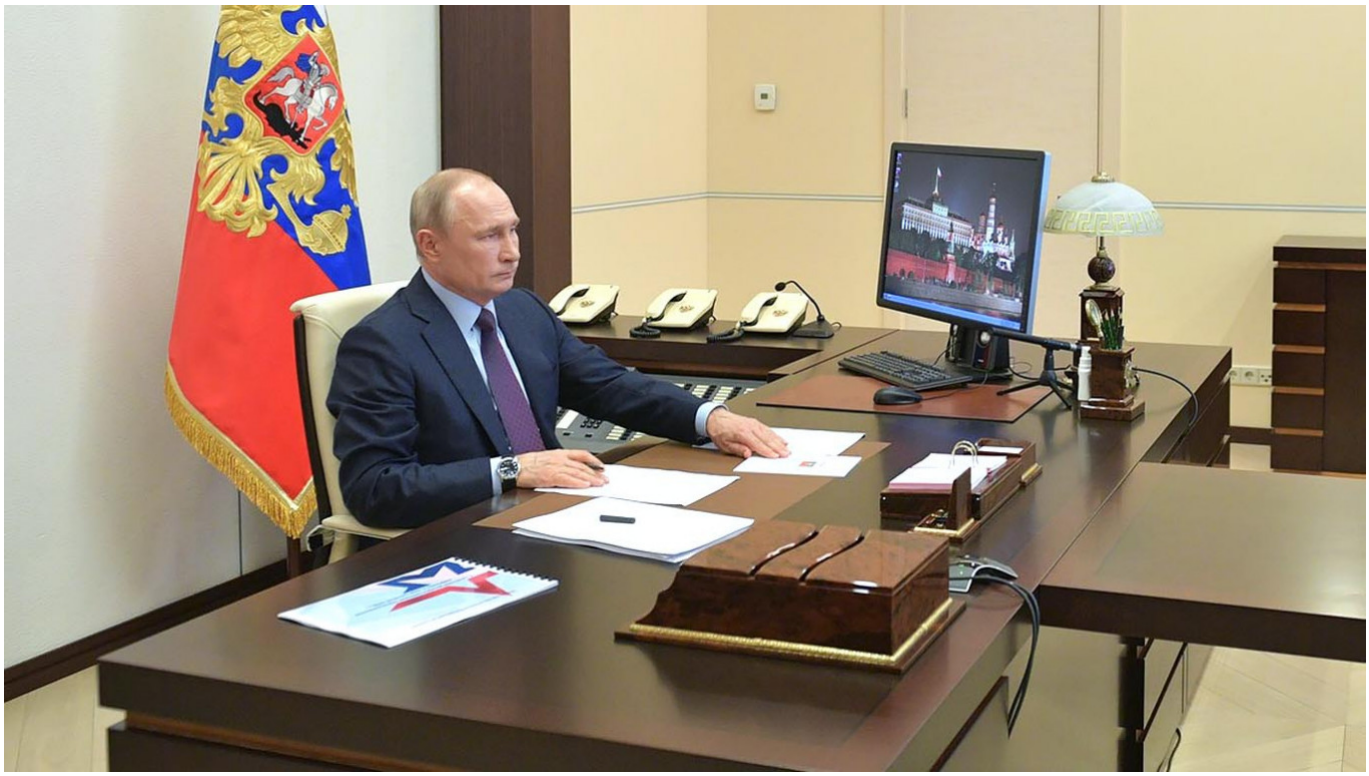
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Putin Withdraws From the Coronavirus Crisis in a Political Abdication

Putin is clearly eager to avoid being identified with the pandemic and the difficult measures being adopted to fight it.

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Abdication tends to be an all-or-nothing matter. As in so much else, Vladimir Putin makes his own rules, and yesterday's address was a menu for an a la carte abdication, relinquishing the terrible responsibility of handling the pandemic, but retaining all the perks of power.

In his presentation, Putin announced that the "national non-working period" — his preferred euphemism for a lockdown in which employers were still expected to pay their workers' salaries — would end today "for the entire country and for all sectors of the economy."

Over to you, guys

Does that mean the end of the "quarantine"? On the very day that the country recorded a record increase in new cases, with the world's second-fastest infection rate behind only the United States? At a time when it is clear the official death rate is seriously understated? And when, while 170,000 tests are administered a day, their accuracy is questionable?

Not quite; instead, he was simply saying that the federally-mandated lockdown was over, but that regional governors would still have the right to impose them in their own territories.

After all, while he conceded that "the fight with the epidemic isn't ending" — arguably, it is still in its early stages given that there is no evidence that the situation is under control — he noted that "the epidemic and associated restrictions have had a strong impact on the economy and hurt millions of our citizens," and so "it is in the interest of all of us for the economy to return to normal quickly."

That is true enough, and the immediate lethal cost of coronavirus does have to be set against both the more subtle toll caused by lockdown and hardship, as well as the broader impact of economic slowdown.

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Likewise, there is a real logic to giving the governors a particular role in determining the best approach in their own territory. This is a vast country, with huge variation in economic, social and public health status, as well as in quite where they may be in the trajectory of the epidemic.

Simply sloughing responsibility onto the governors, though, is no more a valid response now than when Putin first indicated this was his preferred option back in March. They lack the funds, the powers or the specialist guidance.

For example, the federal government has distributed some funds to the regions — something Putin was keen to emphasize — but it has done so with strict instructions as to the uses to which they should be put. Very few regional and city leaders such as those of Moscow, St Petersburg and Tatarstan have the spare capital to fund any distinctive anti-pandemic strategy.

Meanwhile, the federal government is sitting on reserves worth up to $600 billion (not all of which, in fairness, could be used to address this crisis), but is unwilling to spend this rainy-day fund, much less hand control of any of it to the regions.

Besides, even if they had the powers and the resources, how can local governors create a serious strategy tailored to specific local conditions? That requires the kind of specialist scientific guidance that is largely concentrated at the federal level.

No commander-in-chief

Putin is clearly eager to avoid being identified with the pandemic and the difficult measures

being adopted to fight it. Despite having created a highly centralized political system, he is not going to be the commander-in-chief of this war.

Instead, he would rather force local leaders to take the tough decisions, demanding they both save lives and save the economy, while sniping at them from the sidelines.

The governors will do their best, but there is clearly no consensus as to what that means. Moscow's Mayor Sergei Sobyanin has made it clear that there will be no early relaxation, with lockdown extended to 31 May, and new requirements that people wear masks and gloves in shops or on public transport.

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Conversely, even before yesterday's speech, Gleb Nikitin, governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region, was talking up a phased relaxation of the regime, even though it is recording the highest increase in cases after Moscow city and region and St Petersburg.

It remains to be seen which approach will best be able to square the circle of saving lives and preserving the economy.

Putin's *Oprichnina*

In 1564, Ivan the Terrible, angered at the perceived recalcitrance of his boyars, divided his realm into two: the *Oprichnina* ('Separation') and the rest, the *Zemshchina* ('Land'). He took the *Oprichnina* for himself, leaving the Boyars Council to administer the *Zemshchina*, but reserving to himself the right to unleash his private army, the *Oprichniki*, across the border to raid and plunder, to kill his enemies and seize their lands.

In 2020, Vladimir Putin likewise seems to want the best of both worlds, a division of Russia that is not physical but political. He is retaining real power, but handing his boyars the burden of coronavirus. This division didn't work well for Ivan or Russia, leading to lawlessness, instability and foreign invasion.

Much has been said in the past about decentralizing power in the Russian Federation, but this has largely been more rhetorical than real. It is a sad irony that it took a pandemic to bring it back onto the agenda. Even so, this cannot be by treating it as a political *Zemshchina*, something dumped onto the governors, while the key powers, assets and budgets remain firmly in the *Oprichnina*.

Putin's Russia doesn't face the same risks, but its capacity to respond to the pandemic is undoubtedly undermined by the abdication of responsibility by this most hyper-presidential of presidents.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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