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No Victory Day for Sobyanin, or the Other Regional Bosses

Even in the best-case scenario, the victory parade will mean more infections across Russia.

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Andrei Nikerichev / Moskva News Agency

Vladimir Putin is not, it seems, big on delayed gratification. Having reluctantly postponed his Victory Day Parade from 9 May, at the height of Moscow's coronavirus epidemic, he has decreed that it will be held not in September, as some believed (for the end of World War Two in the Pacific) but 24 June, the 75th anniversary of the first-ever such parade, in 1945. His presumed triumph, though, poses monstrous challenges to Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and other regional leaders, and epitomizes the new stresses on the unspoken social contract between center and regions.

To be sure, Moscow has made great progress in controlling the epidemic, bringing down its

daily tally of new cases from a peak of over 6,700 to under 3,000. However, even after another month's controls, however reduced, the risks of a new spike in cases cannot be excluded. (Saratov, for example, has already had to reverse a premature relaxation.)

The essence of the parade is not just in the serried ranks of soldiers marching through Red Square — soldiers who have been drilling intensely for the event — but that it is the focus of a day-long festival of participative patriotism, with medal-bedecked veterans rubbing shoulders with youngsters. In other words, unless it is a very different, and frankly neutered event, it is not something that lends itself easily to social distancing, bringing highly-vulnerable pensioners out into the streets.

Furthermore, Putin wants parades not just in relatively covid-secure Moscow, but in cities across Russia, where the situation is even more uncertain. He has also decreed the holding of the Immortal Regiment marches on 26 July, although admittedly this time with the proviso that this may depend on the epidemiological situation.

Headache for Sobyanin

Nonetheless, having once been the man who memorably made a public intervention to convince a skeptical Putin of the seriousness of the pandemic, Sobyanin appears to be fully on board this time. This may reflect a sense that he risks being outflanked in the inevitable health versus economy debate, with the president leaning towards those advocating taking some risks with the former in the name of the latter.

This will be a serious headache for him, though. Again, assuming this is to be the full-scale pageant, not Victory Day Lite, it involves streets being prepared for the massed ironmongery of the parade and then being repaired afterwards. It means streets blocked off for rehearsals, manhole covers sealed for security reasons, public transport re-routed. And even in the best-case scenario, it will mean more infections afterwards — that is simply an inevitability when one brings crowds together.

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It is not that Moscow cannot handle this, or even afford it. It is, rather, that it is another burden on a city administration (and its budget) at a time when the federal center has arguably not been pulling its weight, being more eager to assign duties and blame than provide support.

This is even more true for other cities, which lack Moscow's deep pockets and political pull.

Shaky social contract

Still, what the president wants, the president tends to get. His apparent hope that he could still hold his constitutional vote and grand parade in March, a double-crowned coronation of sorts, may well have contributed to his being so slow to respond to the pandemic. He certainly is taking a public health risk to hold the parade within a month, although it remains to be seen if he is also going to reschedule the vote soon, in the hope that it benefits from association with victory and patriotic glory.

Whatever the reasoning, it is one more strain on the implicit social contract between the center and the local elites.

While attention tends to focus on the apex of the "power vertical," the truth is that this is neither as powerful nor as vertical as many assume. The Kremlin needs local elites to manage the country for it.

The deal is that mayors and governors, for all that they are formally elected, are the Kremlin's local satraps. They get power, privilege, and the chance to enrich themselves through corruption and embezzlement. The age-old practice of *kormlenie*, 'feeding,' whereby administrators lived off their side-deals, not their salaries, sadly never seems to have gone away. In return, they keep their turfs under control, stable and loyal, and do what the Kremlin wants.

Now, to all their other KPIs — even a semi-feudal system can be infected with modern business jargon – they have controlling a pandemic. But this is simply added to their other ones, without any comparable increase in powers and revenues.

Soviet pathologies

How will they respond? In some cases, as we have already seen, it is by falsifying the data, simply trying to make it look to the Kremlin that they are meeting their targets. In others, by spending money they don't have, worsening an already serious problem of regional debt. Or maybe, as in Chechnya, on using repression and violence to silence critics and impose draconian measures, even in violation of federal law.

This raises three serious long-term risks. It renders the management of the county increasingly difficult and dysfunctional, through institutionalized rule-breaking, falsification of data and debt.

It undermines the legitimacy of a federal center as it becomes to be seen as a source of problems rather than solutions to local challenges. Strikingly, as faith in Putin's leadership takes a hit (albeit from its usual very high level), public approval for local officials' response to the pandemic have scored higher than the central government's.

It strikes at the social contract between the federal and local elites. If they feel that the Kremlin is breaking its deal and demanding too much, local administrators — who themselves need local elites to run their cities or regions — may question its terms. They will generally not challenge Moscow, but may well instead prioritize local alliances and interests over being the Kremlin's loyal proxies.

None of this will, of course, in itself bring down the current government. All of them, on the other hand, were pathologies of the Soviet system when it was in terminal decay. The price is a further erosion of systemic cohesion and legitimacy: I hope Putin feels his parade is worth it.

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

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