

# Beset by crisis, Kremlin holds “victory parade”

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On Wednesday, the Kremlin held a major “victory day” parade in the center of Moscow with some 14,000 troops. The parade was originally scheduled for May 9, the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, but had been delayed because of the spread of the coronavirus.

All social distancing measures in the Moscow region had been lifted only on Monday, a week earlier than originally planned so that the parade could take place. However, the Moscow region still records about 80 percent of new infections in Russia. Every day, between 7,000 and 8,000 new infections are recorded in the country, with the total number of confirmed cases surpassing 600,000 on Wednesday.

The parade and the reopening of the economy have been timed to precede by one week the national referendum on constitutional changes proposed by Putin earlier this year. These changes will allow Putin to run for president again in 2024 and will strengthen the president’s role.

The parade was meant, above all, to foster nationalism and promote a false sense of “national unity.” The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 claimed the lives of at least 27 million Soviet citizens, and the Red Army, despite the devastating role of Stalinism, played the central role in defeating Nazi Germany. While substantial political confusion prevails, above all, about the role of Stalinism, the vast majority of the Russian population still feels a profound association with the fight against fascism.

Besieged by world imperialism and under conditions of growing class tensions, the Russian oligarchy, which emerged out of the Stalinist counterrevolution against the October Revolution, seeks to appeal to these sentiments and exploit them for the promotion of nationalism.

Parades were scheduled in 28 cities, and 64,000 people were expected to attend, a recipe for an unmitigated public health disaster in the midst of a pandemic. Most of these cities are located in regions which are still in the early stages of reopening, with mass gatherings still banned.

However, the parade was a debacle and highlighted, if anything, the growing international isolation of and social tensions within Russia. Because of the ongoing pandemic, virtually no foreign leader of significance attended the parade. Only presidents of former Soviet republics attended, as well as the Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh. The president of Kyrgyzstan travelled to Moscow to attend but after two members of his delegation tested positive upon arrival, he canceled his participation in the parade.

US President Donald Trump, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Chinese President Xi Jinping and French President Emmanuel Macron had all been invited but declined to attend.

In Moscow itself, the mayor urged all residents to remain at home and only watch the parade from home. Those invited were required to test for the virus. However, even though social distancing rules were in place for invited war veterans, many were pictured without masks and in close distance to each other. Reporters on the scene likewise were seen without masks and without practicing social distancing. Twenty-five cities refused to hold parades, pointing to the risk of mass infections.

The holding of the victory parade and the national referendum, in which millions are set to participate under conditions of a raging pandemic, highlight both the criminality and crisis of the Russian oligarchy.

As in other countries, the reopening of the economy in Russia comes much too early and leaves tens of

millions of impoverished workers to face the risk of infection and death. The premature reopening of factories in April had already led to a massive spread of the virus among miners and factory workers, including over 1,200 miners in just one mine in Siberia. It directly contributed to Russia rapidly rising to having the third largest number of total infections in the world in May.

Putin tried to mitigate fears of the virus spreading in another address to the nation on Tuesday, assuring the population that the country would be able to cope. In an effort to present himself as someone seeking to ameliorate social tensions, he announced a slight increase of the income tax from 13 percent to 15 percent for rich individuals who earn over five million rubles (\$73,000) a year.

He also announced an extension of some of the paltry social reforms that had been promised in early April, including payments to healthcare and social workers. Many of these payments have never been made. Putin also said that the Kremlin would make another one-off 10,000-ruble payment (about \$135) for each child under 16. Families with unemployed parents will receive 12,130 rubles (\$175) per month through August.

Under conditions where at least 4.5 million people now count as unemployed, these payments will do little to alleviate even the most extreme social distress. Over one million Russians have lost their jobs since the beginning of the pandemic, but these figures are likely vast underestimates, given that a substantial portion of Russia's workforce is employed in the shadow economy.

Mass infections among industrial and medical workers, in particular, have caused significant social and political anger. In May, thousands of Gazprom workers at the Chayanda field were infected with the virus. Most of them had only received testing and medical treatment after protesting the horrifying conditions.

Because of its crumbling healthcare infrastructure and completely inadequate supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers, Russia has had one of the highest rates of infections and deaths among them in the world. According to the latest official figures, at least 489 medical workers have died from the virus out of a total of 8,503 people (5.75

percent). Nurses and doctors, who receive starvation wages in Russia of just a few hundred dollars a month, staged protests and wrote letters of protest throughout the pandemic.

The popularity rating of Putin, whose public appearances have been extremely muted throughout the pandemic, plunged from 69 percent to 59 percent from February to May. Russian GDP is expected to contract by five percent this year, and the rating agency Fitch estimates that the ruble will devalue to 72 rubles per dollar by the end of the year. The ruble is already standing at 70 to one dollar, more than at any time since its plunge in early 2016.

Over the past two decades, Putin has overseen a vast enrichment of the criminal oligarchy that has emerged out of the Stalinist liquidation of the Soviet Union. The new Global Health report by the Boston Consulting Group found that between 1999 and 2019, the personal fortunes of the richest Russians multiplied by 16 times from \$0.1 trillion to \$1.6 trillion. By contrast, the median income in Russia is just 47,000 rubles (\$675) per month, but millions are earning far less. The mass impoverishment of broad layers of the Russian population by the pandemic and its economic fallout have further exacerbated these extreme levels of social inequality.



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