

Citing Virus, Putin Suspends Vote on Keeping Him in Power

The New York Times

March 25, 2020 Wednesday 05:48 EST

Copyright 2020 The New York Times Company All Rights Reserved

Section: WORLD; europe

Length: 1092 words

Byline: Andrew Higgins

Highlight: President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia postponed a referendum on a constitutional change to term limits and ordered a weeklong national holiday to help halt the spread of the coronavirus.

Body

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia postponed a referendum on a constitutional change to term limits and ordered a weeklong national holiday to help halt the spread of the coronavirus.

MOSCOW — Calling for “discipline and responsibility” in the face of the coronavirus, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia on Wednesday announced the postponement of a referendum next month on whether he can govern until 2036.

In a televised address to the nation from his country residence outside Moscow, Mr. Putin stopped short of imposing a nationwide lockdown — as India and several European countries have done — but ordered a weeklong national holiday starting on Saturday.

He warned that despite the relatively few confirmed infections so far in Russia — 658 as of Wednesday — it was “objectively impossible” to stop the virus from spreading.

The decision to postpone until further notice an April 22 vote on constitutional changes that would allow Mr. Putin to crash through term limits means that the virus has achieved a feat that has eluded the Kremlin’s largely powerless opponents: It has slowed the previously relentless march toward a coronation of Mr. Putin as president for life.

Russia, Mr. Putin said, had managed to “restrain” the spread of the virus by taking early precautions but “we must understand that Russia, simply because of its geographic location, cannot isolate itself from the threat.”

Mr. Putin’s surprise address, his first on the pandemic, followed a meeting on Tuesday with the mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyenin, who warned the president that “the situation is becoming serious” and that the number of sick Russians was “much bigger” than official figures indicated. The mayor has ordered that, starting on Thursday, all Moscow residents over 65 must stay at home.

Mr. Putin, inserting himself into the handling of a crisis previously dominated by Mr. Sobyenin and other officials, pleaded with Russians in his address to take the risk of infection seriously.

Citing Virus, Putin Suspends Vote on Keeping Him in Power

“Please don’t think that ‘this doesn’t concern me.’ It concerns everyone,” he said. Ignoring that message, he warned, would mean that “what is happening today in many Western countries, both in Europe and overseas, can become our immediate future. All recommendations must be followed.”

“It is necessary to protect yourself and your loved ones, to show discipline and responsibility,” he added. “And believe me, the safest thing now is to be at home.”

While telling most people not to return to work for the holiday week starting on Saturday, Mr. Putin said the stay-at-home order would not apply to employees of shops, medical institutions, pharmacies, public transportation, banks and government offices. The move suggests that, despite a drumbeat of warnings in recent days about the risks of a health crisis in Russia, the authorities believe they can avoid a dangerous outbreak of the kind seen across Western Europe without shutting down the country.

Mr. Putin’s critics took to social media as soon as the president finished speaking to complain that the partial lockdown did not go far enough and to warn that the weeklong holiday would only send people flooding onto the streets and into parks and shred the already very limited efforts in Russia at social distancing.

Mr. Putin left it unclear whether the Kremlin would continue as planned with its biggest event of the year — nationwide celebrations on May 9 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Red Army’s victory over Nazi Germany. Current plans include a huge military parade through the center of Moscow and large gatherings of spectators.

Russia on Wednesday reported a sharp jump in confirmed cases, with 163 new infections taking the total to 658. While those figures are low compared with what is happening in much of Western Europe and the United States, the number of new infections was the largest one-day increase in the country yet, stirring alarm that Russia could be following the same path as countries that have been harder hit.

Russia’s relative success in slowing the spread of the virus has fueled heated debate about whether the official statistics can be trusted, with government critics insisting, without solid evidence, that the Kremlin had hidden the scale of the problem, just as Soviet leaders did after the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded in 1986.

Mr. Putin, striking a familiar populist pose as defender of ordinary citizens, detailed a raft of measures to help more vulnerable Russians weather the pandemic. He promised to increase child support allowances, lower insurance premiums and hold creditors at bay while vowing to levy new taxes on foreign investments and money stashed abroad by wealthier Russians.

Russia in January closed the 2,600-mile border with China, the original source of the coronavirus, and it seemed for a time that the move had stopped the spread of Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus.

But Russia was slower to restrict arrivals from Europe after the virus took hold there in February. Moscow’s city government in March mandated two weeks of self-isolation for all arrivals from Italy and other severely affected countries, but flights continued to and from European capitals, and basic precautions were often ignored.

The head of infectious diseases in the southern region of Stavropol, for example, returned to work after a vacation in Spain despite showing symptoms of infection. The official now faces criminal charges for negligence.

In his address, Mr. Putin repeatedly called on Russians to observe the recommendations of doctors and officials, stressing that the country’s fate depended on following the rules.

But the Kremlin has come under criticism for trying to censor information about the spread of the virus, with the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists complaining on Tuesday that the Russian media regulator had ordered the removal of articles from websites and social media that “spread false information.”

The authorities, however, have done nothing to halt unsubstantiated reports that the virus was developed by the Pentagon or by Chinese scientists working in a secret laboratory in Wuhan, the city where the virus first appeared late last year.

Citing Virus, Putin Suspends Vote on Keeping Him in Power

Izvestia, a pro-Kremlin newspaper, for example, published a lengthy article on Tuesday detailing what it called “new facts” about the origins of the virus in a joint Chinese-American research project.

PHOTO: Watching President Vladimir V. Putin’s national address on Wednesday from a bar in Moscow. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Load-Date: March 26, 2020

End of Document