

Kremlin Using Virus Outbreak to Push Through Putin's Reforms: Proekt

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Sergei Kiriyyenko, Putin's first deputy chief of staff who's in charge of the constitutional reforms vote, tested positive for Covid-19 in mid-April, Proekt said. **Alexei Druzhinin / Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / TASS**

The Kremlin is attempting to take advantage of Russia's coronavirus outbreak to maintain President Vladimir Putin's popularity and ensure that the public votes for his constitutional reforms, the Proekt investigative outlet [reported](#) Wednesday, citing unnamed federal officials.

The reforms would potentially allow Putin, 67, to extend his 20-year rule into 2036. Putin postponed a public vote for the constitutional amendments, originally scheduled for last Wednesday, and declared a "non-working" period after Russia saw a sharp spike in Covid-19 infections.

Here are the key takeaways from Proekt's investigation:

Kiriyyenko kickstart

— Sergei Kiriyenko, Putin’s first deputy chief of staff who’s in charge of the constitutional reforms vote, tested positive for Covid-19 in mid-April, Proekt said. Kiriyenko reportedly recovered in three days and his second and third tests were negative.

— Before that, the presidential administration’s domestic policy bloc, which is responsible for elections and voting, had actively opposed introducing quarantine measures that would disrupt its fully formed plan for the April 22 vote.

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— A “panicked” mayor’s office in Moscow, the epicenter of Russia’s Covid-19 outbreak, served as another key factor that ultimately led Putin to postpone the vote. It will now either be held in June or sometime this fall.

— Everyone in the presidential administration’s domestic policy bloc now gets tested for Covid-19 at least once a week. At the cabinet level, only those who directly contact Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin get tested for Covid-19. The other staffers are required to wear face masks.

PR for Putin

— The Kremlin reportedly watched with irritation as social media users and opposition activists speculated about Putin’s alleged self-isolation during the outbreak in mid-March.

— With Putin’s public approval ratings dipping during his four-day stay in Crimea as Western leaders actively communicated with their populations regarding the pandemic, a federal official recalled that “we need to do something too.” In the ensuing days, Putin visited Russia’s top coronavirus hospital in Moscow and declared a nationwide paid “non-working” period.

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— Putin’s public address led to a bump in the polls. Thereafter, the Kremlin reportedly developed a strategy to maintain the public’s loyalty toward the authorities. It included Putin regularly addressing the public and daily news reports showing him discussing efforts to fight the Covid-19 outbreak with officials.

— The good-PR strategy extended to ordering Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin to cede his scheduled remarks announcing support measures for citizens and businesses to Putin in mid-April.

— “It’s important to come out of this so that the people would understand that nothing would have happened without the leader,” an unnamed federal official was quoted as saying.

Overshadowing Sobyenin

— Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin’s skyrocketing visibility amid the outbreak, which was reflected in public [trustworthiness ratings](#), irked both Mishustin and the Kremlin. Putin’s

public approval ratings, meanwhile, slightly dipped amid talk of his absence.

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— Officials and state-backed journalists now present Sobyenin's actions as “the advancement of presidential instructions” as part of the Kremlin's strategy to ensure good PR for Putin.

Regional loyalty

— Kiriienko's domestic policy bloc apparently distributed guidelines to regional authorities on boosting voter loyalty at the height of the Covid-19 outbreak. These included blocking negative news online, attracting elderly voters through online classes, recruiting volunteers and organizing online challenges and flash mobs.

— While some regions attempted to act on some of the ideas, others froze preparations for the vote on Putin's constitutional reforms, citing their focus on dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak.

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