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Russia and the Coronavirus

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Executive Summary

Like many militaries around the world, the Russian Armed Forces took a number of steps to preserve military readiness during the initial stage of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. They also acted as part of the larger Russian Federation domestic response to the spreading disease. The Russian military reinforced a crumbling health-care system through such activities as the accelerated construction of hospitals and the training of staff to run them.

Preliminary analysis of official Russian-sourced and broader media reporting depicts machinations within the Russian government's response to the pandemic and the Russian military's role. Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu solidified his image as a capable manager as he dealt with challenges of the spring conscription, the Victory Day parade, and the organization of military pandemic response as a supporting effort to the national response. Of particular note was President Putin's use of the military and its capabilities in conjunction with diplomacy, information messaging, and a sophisticated disinformation campaign to burnish Russia's image worldwide by targeting selected nations with coronavirus aid while undermining and tarnishing the U.S. image.

This paper focuses on the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Russian military. It contributes to the continued study at the Institute of Defense Analyses of a country that the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy lists among its long-term strategic competitors.

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1. Introduction

Under the leadership of Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin, Russia has endured an aggressive spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic over the last 6 months. The rapid advancement of COVID-19 throughout the 145 million Russian population, which is spread across 11 time zones, demonstrated that the Russian health system is suffering from poor funding. It also highlighted the incomplete health reforms and misguided attempt to replace imports of drugs and medical equipment with poor quality local production. The shortage of doctors is so acute that medical students are being taken from school and put in frontline hospitals. Russia faces questions about the adequacy and availability of testing and personal protective equipment, and about the provision of basic medical services and reporting, especially in and from the more remote areas east of the Urals. Lack of such equipment and the government's failure to make promised incentive payments is leading a large number of doctors and nurses to walk out of hospitals. In the Kaliningrad region alone, 350 physicians reportedly refused to work during the pandemic.¹ How Vladimir Putin has employed his military to handle this crisis—both internationally and internally—provides important insights into a country that the United States National Defense Strategy identifies as a strategic competitor.² Because this “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security,”³ this paper focuses on the initial Russian response to the pandemic in the international sphere and how COVID-10 affected the Russian armed forces.

A. Russia's Initial International Response to COVID-19

It is unlikely that President Vladimir Putin ever visited Chicago, but he has recently taken a page out of former Mayor Rahm Emmanuel's playbook: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.” In a highly choreographed effort initiated after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Putin has adroitly used diplomacy, information messaging, his

¹ Ilya Shepelin, “How Kremlin Propaganda Destroyed Russian Healthcare,” *The Moscow Times*, May 11, 2020 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/11/how-kremlin-propaganda-destroyed-russian-healthcare-a70242>.

² “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington, DC: Department of Defense,” accessed July 22, 2020, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

³ “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington, DC: Department of Defense,” accessed July 22, 2020, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

military forces, and a sophisticated disinformation campaign to burnish Russia's image worldwide, targeting selected nations with coronavirus aid while undermining and tarnishing the U.S. image. Meantime, Russian military forces have maintained their operational capability and aggressive behavior, which includes harassing U.S. Navy maritime patrol aircraft in the Mediterranean and conducting high-profile offensive operations in space and in the Arctic.

As the coronavirus infection spread worldwide in the spring of 2020, Putin initiated a personal campaign to provide Russian medical assistance and expertise to friends and foe alike. Three countries stand out: Italy, Serbia and the United States. Putin's strategy of being first with the least amount of aid but nevertheless garnering the most positive coverage began with a personal telephone call to the leader of the target country, followed immediately by the arrival of Russian military aircraft and personnel with such seemingly substantial COVID-19 related materiel as masks, personal protective equipment, and ventilators. Each delivery was afforded extensive Russian media coverage.

B. Italy

Two days after a Putin telephone call with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, on March 23 as many as 15 Russian military transports—each emblazoned with “From Russia with Love”—landed at Pratica di Mari Air Base, in northern Italy. Having been greeted by the Italian Foreign Minister, the disembarked military convoy, comprising military personnel (likely chemical-biological warfare specialists and medical personnel) and various kinds of anti-viral medical equipment, proceeded with broad media coverage on “the roads of a NATO member” to Bergamo. While visibly demonstrating that Russia can and will provide needed aid quickly to any government considered friendly, the Putin gesture was not entirely a “win”—a spokesman for the Italian Defense Ministry said, “80 percent of the [Russian] aid was considered useless.”⁴ Indeed, while Russia immediately and very visibly provided 300,000 masks, Germany and France provided 2 million. Nevertheless, the Russian media adroitly used the delivery to criticize the apparent reluctance of Italy's NATO allies to provide such support.

C. Serbia

China provided medical masks and protective equipment to Serbia on March 21. On April 2, Russian President Putin promised to send Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic 11 military aircraft carrying medical personnel and equipment. The first aircraft arrived the

⁴ Mitch Prothero “Russia Sent Italy a Military Convoy of Medical Supplies to Help with the Coronavirus Outbreak. Italy Said It Was Useless and Accused Them of a PR Stunt,” Business Insider, March 26, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-italy-russia-military-convoy-supplies-useless-pr-stunt-2020-3>.

next day, suggesting that this operation had been planned well in advance. The provision of badly needed support, which was a reaffirmation of Serbia's military ties and cultural affinity with Russia, offset China's growing influence in Serbia and southern Europe. Despite Serbian needs, Russia prioritized its overseas COVID-19 response in late March to Italy—presumably for the information campaign victory of the Russian military landing in a NATO member country. Only after the mission to Italy was fully operational did Russia turn to help a close partner. NATO, however, was certainly not the only target. China was also providing humanitarian support to Italy and Serbia. Offsetting China's growing influence in these countries was a second objective for this humanitarian campaign.

D. United States

CNN has reported that U.S. President Trump and Russian President Putin have had more sustained communication with one another since the beginning of April than they have had at any time since 2016, reportedly speaking with one another four times between March 30 and April 12.⁵ Although their discussions apparently focused primarily on resolving the ongoing oil price war, the coronavirus pandemic was also a topic of discussion. By dealing directly with President Trump, Putin, a judo master, is keeping the more anti-Putin/anti-Russian elements of the Washington foreign policy establishment off balance and openly elevating himself and Russia to a position of equality with its arch competitor.

As a result of a Trump–Putin phone call, on April 1 a Russian AN-124 heavy transport aircraft arrived at New York's John F. Kennedy airport with a reported 60 tons of masks and ventilators.⁶ Because these items were in short supply in New York City at the time, this single event of assistance received worldwide media coverage. But it was later reported that Russia billed the United States nearly \$660,000 for this COVID assistance.⁷ Press reports indicated that much of the equipment, such as chemical warfare-style gas masks and household cleaning gloves, was not typically used by U.S. hospitals. There were also voltage compatibility issues with the 45 Russian respirators.

⁵ Nicole Gaouette, Marshall Cohen and Michael Conte, "Putin Leverages Coronavirus Chaos to Make a Direct Play to Trump," CNN, April 18, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/18/politics/trump-putin-unprecedented-contacts/index.html>

⁶ Marcus Weisgerber, "Russian Cargo Plane With Medical Supplies Lands in New York," Defense One, April 1, 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2020/04/russian-cargo-plane-medical-supplies-lands-new-york/164293/>.

⁷ Anne Flaherty, Conor Finnegan, Mike Levine, and Katherine Faulders, "Russia Bills US \$660K for Aid That Included Gas Masks, Household Cleaning Gloves," ABC News, May 1, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/russia-bills-us-660k-aid-included-gas-masks/story?id=70451912>.

Besides gaining the “propaganda bonanza” of Russia visibly helping the United States, Russian leaders apparently also hoped for reciprocity when required. As Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reportedly stated, “It is important to note that when offering assistance to U.S. colleagues, the president [Putin] assumes that when U.S. manufacturers of medical equipment and materials gain momentum, they will also be able to reciprocate if necessary.”⁸ A May 21 announcement by both the American Embassy Moscow and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported this assumption: “The U.S. is donating \$5.6 million in humanitarian aid to the people of Russia, including 200 U.S.-manufactured ventilators that will save countless lives. 50 ventilators arrived today, 150 will arrive next week.”

Russia did not limit its aid to just a few countries. Other nations benefiting from Russian aid included China, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Mongolia, and states of the Former Soviet Union. It is also reported that a number of unidentified African countries have asked for Russian assistance.

⁸ Reuters, “Russian Plane with Coronavirus Medical Gear Lands in U.S. after Trump-Putin Call,” NBC News, April 1, 2020, accessed July 22, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/russian-plane-coronavirus-medical-gear-lands-u-s-after-trump-n1174436>.

2. The Disinformation Campaign

Since the 1980s Russia has mounted anti-U.S. disinformation campaigns, consistently accusing the U.S. Army of weaponizing such high-profile diseases as AIDS, H1N1, and Ebola.⁹ Despite Putin's recent charm offensive, the State Department's Global Engagement Center reports that Putin has again drawn on his well-used playbook to mount a vicious disinformation campaign against the United States. Furthermore, he has fully coordinated this operation with China and Iran.¹⁰ The messages that the United States designed the coronavirus and used the U.S. Army to introduce the disease into China has reverberated in Russian, Chinese, and Iranian social and other media. Russia is also reusing its longstanding disinformation campaign against Georgia's Central Public Health Reference Laboratory (renamed the Richard G. Lugar Center for Public Health Research). As the coronavirus spread, Russian and Chinese state media began claiming the coronavirus was the product of a U.S. military bioweapons operation and attempted to assign blame for the pandemic on the Lugar Center in Tblisi, which has in fact been assisting the Georgian government in its response to the pandemic. As with previous Russian disinformation efforts, the overall intent is to deflect blame, damage the American image, and undermine worldwide confidence in U.S. science and antiviral therapies.¹¹

In Italy, Putin appeared to have taken a page from the Mafia's playbook. While the substance of the Putin–Conte telephone call is unknown, Putin has been very vocal on the adverse effects EU sanctions have had on Russia's economy and consistently blames the EU for the country's adverse economic condition. Conte and his government have openly criticized the EU's apparent lack of support for Italy's deteriorating financial condition, made worse by the EU's failure to assist Italy in dealing with the ongoing international refugee crisis, which is directly affecting Italy. Putin possibly offered Conte a deal he couldn't refuse: Russia would help him deal with the coronavirus pandemic if Italy returned the favor by lobbying the EU to reduce or eliminate sanctions on Russia.

⁹ Ali Breland, "Russian Media Outlets are Blaming the Coronavirus on the United States" *Mother Jones*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/02/russian-disinformation-coronavirus/>.

¹⁰ Lea Gabrielle, "Global Engagement Center Briefing on Disinformation and Propaganda Related to COVID-19 - Special Briefing," March 27, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-special-envoy-lea-gabrielle-global-engagement-center-on-disinformation-and-propaganda-related-to-covid-19/>.

¹¹ Paul Stronski "Ex-Soviet Bioweapons Labs Are Fighting COVID-19," *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/25/soviet-bioweapons-labs-georgia-armenia-kazakhstan-coronavirus-russia-disinformation/>.

3. Implications for the Russian Armed Forces

By June 8, 2020, Russia had more than 459,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 5725 deaths. As measured by deaths per million, Russia had sustained a lower percentage of officially reported deaths than any other Western European nation. Putin and one of his closest confidants, Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu, carefully used and husbanded the Russian Armed Forces during the preliminary months of the pandemic. It appears that Putin tried to stay away from the limelight during the initial response, likely due to political concern over responsibility for the Russian response. On the other hand, Shoygu, who was the Minister of Emergency Situations for over 16 years and is a Kremlin political survivor, likely viewed the crisis as an opportunity. An astute politician in the Soviet/Russian tradition, over time he has carefully constructed a public image as the best government manager and the least corrupt of those around Putin. While Shoygu is certainly driven in part by patriotism, he likely views himself as a potential successor to Putin as the President of Russia. To maintain his position in Kremlin circles and keep his public approval high, Shoygu needs to walk a tightrope over the course of this crisis.

While the Russian military was quick to respond to Putin's very carefully orchestrated international outreach, Shoygu ensured the Ministry of Defense did not have a prominent government lead in the national response to the infectious disease. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin assumed on this role by chairing an interagency council called the "Coordination Council of the Government of the Russian Federation for the Combat of the Spread of the New Coronavirus Infection on the Territory of the Russian Federation."¹² The members of this interagency council represented a diverse group of government organizations that included leaders such as the ministers of Health, Finance, Internal Affairs, and Emergency Situations. Deputy Minister of Defense General Dimitry Bulgakov served as the defense representative, but was not even part of the official members of presidium of the committee. While Bulgakov had the logistics portfolio, making him a logical addition to the committee, he was one of the more junior

¹² There are six core members representing the presidium and another 28 members for full meetings that represent of all of the key government agencies to include those controlled by the President and the Duma. They represent a diverse group of organizations to across the government, including the Ministry of Health, Finance, and Emergency Situations. In addition, there are representatives from the Presidential Administration, the FSB, the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service), and the MOD. This makes this coordination truly an interagency group.

deputy ministers in the Ministry of Defense (MOD).¹³ Under the Coordination Council, Mishustin created the Operational Center for the Prevention of the Arrival and Spread of New Coronavirus Infection in the Territory of the Russian Federation. Vice Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova led this team, along with 12 members, generally at the rank of deputy minister. Tellingly, there was no representation from the MOD or general staff on this body.¹⁴ This allowed Shoygu, like Putin, to maintain distance from the broader government response so as to insulate himself from failure and arrogate to himself success while taking on those roles that could enhance his and the Army's image.¹⁵

But Shoygu was not completely free from this crisis. Current Russian national security documents identify the challenges that a pandemic like the coronavirus present and how the government may shape its response. As the government's foundation for strategic planning, "The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy," 2015, describes a world in which "epidemics are becoming widespread, [with] many of them caused by new and previously unknown viruses." The Strategy designates public health as one of the nine national priorities and notes that "threats to national security in the sphere of protecting citizens' health are posed by the emergence of epidemics and pandemics." It also reveals impediments to public health in Russia such as the availability of medical assistance, low qualification standards of medical personnel, and a "material and technological dependence on foreign [pharmaceutical] suppliers."¹⁶

Even though neither the MOD nor the Armed Forces are mentioned directly in the paragraphs on epidemics, they do have a formal role to play. The 2014 Russian Military Doctrine provides for the domestic use of the "Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" in peacetime to participate in "law enforcement activities and in ensuring public security,"

¹³ While most of the other ministries or agencies are represented by their minister or head to include the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) and SVR, the MOD is represented by a more junior minister of defense, General Dmitry Bulgakov. Bulgakov does have the logistics portfolio and has been a logistic officer in the Russian military for his entire career, but he still represents a lower public profile for the MOD on this committee (ПРАВИТЕЛЬСТВО РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ, РАСПОРЯЖЕНИЕ от 18 марта 2020 г. № 650-п, МОСКВА).

¹⁴ The lead agency is the Russia's Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (ROSPOTREBNADZOR), which is responsible for epidemiology. This agency represents such ministries as Health, Transport, Emergency Situations, Foreign Affairs, and Internal Affairs. There is also a representative from the FSB and Aeroflot on the committee (<http://government.ru/news/38865/>).

¹⁵ In addition, the Security Council of the Russian Federation and a joint meeting of the Coordination Council and a Working Group of the State Council, which was composed of all the governors of the Russian Federation, have met during this crisis. While Shoygu does not have a role on State Council, he is one of the 12 permanent members of the SCRF, and his first deputy and Chief of the General Staff, General Valeriy Gerasimov, has a seat when the full Security Council meets, which is once or twice biannually.

¹⁶ "The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy," approved by Russian Federation President V. Putin, December 31, 2015.

as well as “emergency management.” The Doctrine states that the decision to employ these forces in peacetime is vested exclusively in the Russian president in accordance with the procedure prescribed by the federal legislation.¹⁷ The president has formally exercised this decision domestically and, as seen above, internationally, in providing assistance to Italy, Serbia, and the United States.

A. Construction of Military Hospitals

What has the Ministry of Defense been called upon to do domestically? The initial task from Putin was to build 16 multifunctional medical centers across Russia. Putin armed the Ministry with 8.8 billion rubles to bring this effort to fruition. By May 15, the MOD had completed all 16 hospitals and then started work in late May on three additional hospitals to support the major outbreak in Dagestan.¹⁸ Although these centers reportedly had a total bed capacity of 1,600, they were likely to be overrun quickly. For example, the Medical Center in the Rostov Region only has 160 beds.¹⁹ The Russian MoD also set up a mobile field hospital at the largest gold-producing mine in Siberia to treat miners for coronavirus. That facility has the capacity to treat up to 1,100 people.²⁰

In addition, the staff for these hospitals started to undergo specialized training at the Kirov Military Medical Institute in St. Petersburg. The Russian military also constructed a number of military field hospitals, including one at the First Guards Tank Army Headquarters on the outskirts of Moscow.²¹ As the caseload increases in a number of the regions, these facilities have the potential to play an important role in the Russian response, unless in their rapid construction, they turn out to be Potemkin villages. Of course, these hospitals also will serve the important function of improving the quality of medical support to the various units housed at the bases where the hospitals were built. This will certainly be seen by the military as a positive legacy once the COVID-19 pandemic has run its course.

¹⁷ The Russian Federation’s Military Doctrine, approved by Russian Federation President V. Putin, December 25, 2014.

¹⁸ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63355>; and <http://mil.ru/covid/bulletins.htm>.

¹⁹ Mathieu Boulegue, “How Is the Russian Military Responding to COVID-19?” War on the Rocks, May 4, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/how-is-the-russian-military-responding-to-covid-19/>.

²⁰ Reuters, “Russian Army Sets Up Mobile Hospital to Fight Coronavirus at Siberian Gold Mine,” May 18, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-russia-mine/russian-army-sets-up-mobile-hospital-to-fight-coronavirus-at-siberian-gold-mine-idUSKBN22U1PP>.

²¹ <https://iz.ru/1003705/aleksei-ramm-bogdan-stepovoi/tankisty-speshat-na-pomoshch-na-borbu-s-covid-19-brosheny-voennye-mediki>.

B. COVID-19 Snap Exercise

Despite the onset of the pandemic across the nation, the Russian Armed Forces conducted a nationwide Snap Exercise as a training event and show of force for the Russian public from March 25 to 28, 2020. Billed as a readiness exercise to hone the Armed Forces response to COVID-19, events related to the exercise occurred throughout all six Russian military districts. Primarily focused on medical and disinfectant units, the exercise likely also helped Russian logistical planners understand how to better deploy Russian medical equipment and supplies across Russia.²² Since the end of this exercise, however, there has been limited additional direct support from the military, except for some minor localized support to hospitals in the Western Military District, medical hospital construction in Dagestan, and the significant efforts of disinfection across Russia as noted below.

C. The Russian Disinfection Campaign

Conducted by Russian Army chemical and biological contamination units, the disinfection campaign was also another great opportunity for Shoygu to be seen as leading a patriotic mission to save Russia. A legacy of the Cold War–era Soviet Army, these units were employed across Russia in a campaign apparently focused in three different directions: (1) to provide disinfection to military facilities, housing, and schools; (2) to disinfect military industrial factories; and (3) to support regional and oblast governors with disinfection of key infrastructure and medical facilities. Although these efforts did not necessarily make the highlights of Russian TV news as much as the medical centers being built, Russian soldiers were seen in public at a local level fighting COVID-19. Interestingly, this effort seemed to be controlled at the Joint Strategic Command level as opposed to being a more traditional, centrally controlled effort from Moscow. For instance, four specialized force groups were established in the Western Military District (ZVO) to combat the coronavirus. These forces included military units from radiation, chemical, and biological defense troops, medical, engineering units, and military police units from combat units.²³ It is likely that these units are responsible for much of the military response in the most active regions of the Western Military District. Also, coming on the heels of the March 25–27 COVID-19 snap exercise, it is likely that these units were organized based on lessons learned from this event.

At this time, it is unknown whether the disinfection campaign was an effective weapon against the disease or simply a useful public relations event. Many of the reports have units disinfecting streets and bus stops in their effort to stop the pandemic. While this

²² https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12283744@egNews.

²³ https://vpk.name/news/387681_minoborony_rf_sozdalo_gruppirovki_dlya_borby_s_koronavirusom.html.

certainly provides direct visibility of the Russian Army protecting the Russian populace, one wonders what real effect these efforts will have on preventing the spread of the virus.

D. Russian Army Medical Readiness

Central to the MOD's initial response to COVID-19 was medical force protection. There was limited reporting on the actual numbers of COVID-19 cases in the military, which should not be surprising because Russia closely holds its information on military readiness. But the data presented so far provide disparate numbers. As of June 6, 2020, the official numbers from the MOD were just under 12,000 confirmed cases in the military. The MOD reported that approximately 4200 personnel have recovered from the virus.²⁴ Certainly, the threat to the Russian Army remains strong, as many of the oblasts and cities with large troop concentrations—Moscow, Moscow Oblast, St Petersburg, Murmansk, Tula, and Riazan—suffered larger levels of outbreak than elsewhere. This provides a medical threat to the high-profile units stationed in these areas.

It is entirely possible that the numbers provided did reflect official number of infections known to the MOD. Testing was problematic across Russia. Military members are generally younger and, most especially in the operational force, in better physical condition than their civilian counterparts. This disparity could lead to more asymptomatic case or less severe cases, resulting in military members not being tested or false-negative tests accepted as accurate. In addition, the MOD did start to take measures to limit the spread into many military bases and commands quite early. Even in normal times, Russia makes it very difficult for even Russian citizens to enter military bases, which also helped to protect their forces during the initial phase of the pandemic by creating natural isolation. At the same time, however, there are likely many local commands and areas where the numbers are being suppressed or the tests are not being done for a variety of reasons, ranging from corruption to poor implementation. Governance has always been a problem in Russia. This also holds true even in the military.

Finally, there are numerous examples from today's Russia and its Soviet predecessor when military deaths and disasters have been hidden from the public. So this pattern certainly should not be overlooked either. Of course, it is important to note that even in countries that try to keep accurate tabulations of infectious disease (and, in fact, Russia has done a decent job of this in the past²⁵), the actual counts are not complete until months after the period ends. Further, these numbers often need to be analyzed statistically to reflect the best case ranges as opposed to relying simply on a base count. Hence, we are months away from really knowing what the numbers are. This leads to the conclusion that even if the

²⁴ <http://mil.ru/covid/bulletins.htm?id=12296048@egNews>, accessed 6 June 2020.

²⁵ Sergey V. Netesov and J. Lyle Conrad, "Emerging Infectious Diseases in Russia, 1990-1999," *Perspective 7*, no 1 (February 2001), https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/7/1/70-0001_article.

figures are not being suppressed by the government, they likely do not represent the real the count of the caseload in the military.

It appears that the MOD took the implications on medical readiness quite seriously at the start of the crisis.²⁶ Special protocols were ordered for entry into military bases and commands. It also appears that the MOD stressed the wearing of masks for routine activities and at least for some field exercises. Shoygu appeared to be publicly leading by example. For example, during his publicized visit to the Army's new Cathedral at Park Patriot, Shoygu and his entire entourage were seen prominently wearing masks.²⁷ The MOD and Russian Federation Navy (RFN) also introduced measures to protect their nuclear submarine forces, especially those getting ready to depart on or returning from a patrol.²⁸ Despite the importance of readiness, however, there may have been some interesting lapses related to the medical force-protection efforts in high-priority units. For instance, in the midst of the pandemic, the Russian Airborne Forces conducted a series of 150 different separate sporting events for its troops. While social-distancing standards were in evidence in publicly published photographs, one has to wonder how closely they were adhered to off camera.²⁹ During the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian Airborne Forces planned to celebrate Victory Day with concerts in 19 different cities. The command stressed that social distancing would be practiced, but it is easy to imagine that this celebration would have strong potential to lead to the spread of the virus by the soldiers and the support group who went to the concerts or, worse yet for the Russian Airborne Forces, by soldiers who were virus free returning to their bases potentially carrying the disease.³⁰

E. Conscription 2020

One of the most important events for the Russian military in the spring is its annual call-up of conscripts. Conducting this nationwide event in a timely and safe manner this year was vital for the Russian Armed Forces. The MOD certainly fully appreciated the importance of replacing its current conscripts, who had already started to leave military

²⁶ Some may argue that given the small size of the Russian military (at the highest figure available, it makes up just over 1 million service members and civilians, and this figure is highly likely to be inflated), this matter does not have a major impact on the pandemic or the Russian response. But during the pandemic of 1918, it was in fact the armies of the world that spread this disease so rapidly across the globe. With the end of the Spring conscription and conscripts all across Russia getting ready to head back to their homes, this could have a similar impact.

²⁷ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12288301@egNews.

²⁸ <https://iz.ru/1006171/roman-kretcul-bogdan-stepovoi-aleksei-ramm/korabli-postoiat-dlia-podvodnikov-vveli-strogie-pravila-profilaktiki>.

²⁹ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12289631@egNews.

³⁰ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12289765@egNews.

units, with a new cohort. Delaying the draft would have serious ramifications on the training of the 135,000 conscript soldiers, personnel readiness of units, and the entire Russian military exercise schedule. The MOD undertook a broad public relations campaign to reassure the Russian society that the conscription would be conducted in a medically safe manner. Conscription will thus be a key test for Shoygu and his MOD. It would not be advisable from a military standpoint for Russia to cancel the spring conscription, but improper conduct of the conscription could spread COVID-19 disease across the military, including to many of its most important units that still rely on conscript soldiers. While Shoygu has been able to improve somewhat Russian society's opinion about the treatment of its recruits (partly through an aggressive campaign to limit the ability of independent media and nongovernmental organizations in Russia to monitor and report on issues), having a large number of young Russian 18-year-olds suddenly contract the COVID-19 during their induction would be a disaster for the image of the Russian Armed Forces.

Cracks have started to appear in the process. While the conscription started on its normal date of April 1, new recruits were not to arrive to units until May 20 and with a completion date planned for July 15. In addition, all recruits were ordered to undergo a two-week mandatory quarantine upon arrival in their new units.³¹ Although they were supposed to be undergoing some training during this period, it certainly will be limited, resulting in further delays to on-the-job and unit training. Further, the actual initial intake of conscripts was very slow. Even with the efforts put in place to attempt a safe conscription, as of June 5, 2020, only 8,500 conscripts had been accepted at the conscription centers.³² It is likely that this delay will have ripple effects across the Russian training cycle this year.

F. The On-again Off-again Victory Day Parade

Not all events have gone well. The annual May 9 Victory Day Parade in Moscow turned into a minor debacle for the MOD. This year the parade was to have commemorated the 75th anniversary of Russia's victory over Nazi Germany. To put on this national spectacle in Moscow in any year takes a great deal of preparation. Units are called from all of the Joint Strategic Commands. These units, which are the most important for Russia, range from Strategic Rocket Force units to the vaunted Russian Airborne Forces. The troops conduct multiple practice parades weeks before the actual event. This means that the troops are sent to Moscow early, often in April, and they remain in the city until the completion of parade, when they return to their home units.

³¹ <https://iz.ru/1005815/2020-04-29/priemnye-komissii-voenkomatov-v-moskve-nachnut-rabotu-12-maia>.

³² <http://mil.ru/covid/bulletins.htm?id=12296048@egNews>, accessed 6 June, 2020.

This year, the troops had already arrived in Moscow in the early stages of the outbreak of the pandemic, and although no practice parade in Moscow was conducted, they had started training at the Alabino military base on the outskirts of Moscow. A number of observers raised warnings about the threat of conducting this parade during an ongoing pandemic and recommended its cancellation.³³ At least 376 Russian cadets were infected with the coronavirus after participating in rehearsals at the Alabino base for the originally scheduled parade.³⁴ In late April, in what was clearly a difficult political decision, Putin reluctantly postponed his showcase event. Further, this postponement shows that the crisis in Russia is now considered quite serious. The military units assigned were sent back to their home stations and required to undergo two weeks of quarantine before returning to their normal duties.

Then, in late May, believing the COVID-19 spread to be under control in Moscow, Putin again changed his position on the parade and ordered it to occur on June 24, the same date that the first Victory Parade was conducted in 1946.³⁵ Minister of Defense Shoygu announced recently that only asymptomatic troops and those who have developed immunity to coronavirus will march in the rescheduled parade.³⁶ The wisdom of this move will not be known until well after the parade, when the resulting impact can be analyzed.

G. Impacts of the Coronavirus on Russian Operational Capability

On April 24, 2020, Minister of Defense Shoygu emphasized that the coronavirus pandemic should not affect the military's work.³⁷ Despite the commitment of Russian forces to domestic and international pandemic-response missions, there was little reported impact on the Russian military's ability to conduct training or operations. A review of activities reported by the Russian military during the second half of April demonstrates the continued execution of a wide range of military activities across the entire military and country. The Kazan aviation plant named for S. P. Gorbunov completed the navigation, engine, and weapons systems upgrades on two Tu-160 bombers, and long-range aviation

³³ <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-52492695>; <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/8169977>; and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/06/russia-defies-calls-to-halt-victory-day-parade-rehearsals>.

³⁴ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/11/400-russian-cadets-infected-with-coronavirus-after-moscow-v-day-rehearsals-proekt-a70238>.

³⁵ <https://iz.ru/1017906/2020-05-31/peskov-rasskazal-podrobnosti-provedeniia-parada-pobedy-24-iiunia-v-moskve>.

³⁶ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/02/russia-says-only-coronavirus-immune-troops-will-march-at-victory-day-parade-a70454>.

³⁷ "Shoigu: The Coronavirus Pandemic Should Not Affect the Activities of the Russian Army," Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 24, 2020, accessed April 26, 2020, www.eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12288663@egNews.

pilots ferried the aircraft to their permanent airfield in the Saratov region.³⁸ Antiaircraft missile troops assigned to the Northern Fleet deployed S-300 systems from the Arctic to the Ashuluk training ground in the Astrakhan region to conduct live-fire exercises against targets simulating various types of aircraft and cruise missiles.³⁹ Tu-22M3 long-range aviation crews in the Murmansk region exercised with An-12 transport aircraft and Mi-8 helicopters, and they relocated to an operational airfield to practice search-and-rescue operations at sea and engaging enemy naval targets.⁴⁰ Baltic Fleet signal troops executed a planned exercise with over 100 pieces of equipment at the training area in the Kaliningrad region.⁴¹ Russian forces conducted a “direct-ascent anti-satellite (DA-ASAT) missile test on April 15.”⁴² Units throughout the Russian Airborne Forces conducted scheduled training and evaluations of individual and unit critical tasks during the winter training period. We note the wide use of facial masks in the photos that accompanied the articles about training in airborne units,⁴³ but troop proclivity to wear the masks off camera could not be determined.

Individuals and crews representing the various Russian military services and branches continued to train across the country in preparation for the upcoming International Army

³⁸ “Long-Range Aviation Crews Relocated Tu-160 Aircraft to the Deployment Point,” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 23, 2020, accessed April 26, 2020, www.eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12288566@egNews.

³⁹ “Northern Fleet Missile Units Conduct Live-Fire Drills at the Ashuluk Training Ground in the Astrakhan Region,” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 16, 2020, accessed April 26, 2020, www.eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12287089@egNews.

⁴⁰ “Long-Range Aviation Exercise Was Held in Murmansk Region,” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 17, 2020, accessed April 26, 2020, www.eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12287223@egNews.

⁴¹ “Field Training with Signalmen of Baltic Fleet,” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 16, 2020. www.eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12287088@egNews. Accessed April 26, 2020.

⁴² Ryan Browne, “US Accuses Russia of Putting US Pilots at Risk during Aerial Encounter and Testing of Anti-satellite Missile, CNN, April 15, 2020, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/15/politics/us-russia-intercept-missile-test/index.html>. Accessed May 1, 2020.

⁴³ “В Тульском соединении ВДВ прошла командно-штабная тренировка.” [“An airborne unit in Tula conducted a command and staff exercise”], Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 23, 2020, accessed April 27, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12288558@egNews; also “Более 1000 военнослужащих и около 150 единиц военной ...” [“More than 1000 servicemen and nearly 150 pieces of military and specialized equipment started to undergo a control test during the winter training period at the Ivanov Airborne unit”], Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 19, 2020, accessed April 28, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12287495@egNews; also “В Ульяновском соединении ВДВ завершилось контрольное занятие с боевой стрельбой из вооружения БМД-2” [“An airborne unit in Ul’ianovsk conducted a BMD-2 live fire exercise”], Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 27, 2020, accessed April 28, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12289125@egNews.

Games scheduled from August 23 to September 5, 2020; the Russian MOD had invited 90 countries to the competition.⁴⁴ Ship crews from the Caspian Flotilla prepared to conduct live-fire drills against surface and aerial targets in preparation for Sea Cup 2020.⁴⁵ Engineer troops and tank crews in the Western Military District prepared for the qualifying rounds of “Engineer Formula 2020”⁴⁶ and “Tank Biathlon.”⁴⁷ Individuals, as well as infantry fighting vehicle and tank crews, at the Far Eastern Higher Combined Arms Command School trained for live-fire competitions.⁴⁸

The initial phase of the coronavirus appeared to have no major impact on Russian air, ground, or maritime operations. In the span of less than a week in mid-April, Russian fighters aggressively intercepted U.S. Navy P-8 aircraft twice over the Mediterranean Sea. The Russian Su-35 aircraft in the second incident reportedly took off from the Hmeimim airbase in Syria.⁴⁹ Recent NATO intercepts of Russian aircraft indicate a continued Russian focus on offensive air operations. On April 17, 2020, Belgian F-16 fighters deployed as part of the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission intercepted a Russian air element of two Su-24, one Su-27, and one Su-30 that overflew the USS Donald Cook, a U.S. destroyer operating off the Lithuanian coast. The Russian aircraft were reportedly armed with live air-to-surface missiles.⁵⁰ On April 28, 2020, Polish fighters operating as part of

⁴⁴ “Russian Defense Ministry invites NATO countries to Army Games 2020,” TASS Russian News Agency, January 24, 2020, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://tass.com/defense/1112597>.

⁴⁵ “The Crews of Caspian Flotilla ships have started preparing for Sea Cup competition in the framework of Army Games 2020,” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 24, 2020, accessed April 27, 2020, www.eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12288607@egNews.

⁴⁶ “Engineer Troops specialists of combined arms army of Western MD completed the army stage of the Engineering Formula 2020 competition,” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 21, 2020, accessed April 26, 2020, www.eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12287790@egNews.

⁴⁷ “Tank Army Crews Will Represent the Western Military District at All-Army Tank Competitions ‘Tank biathlon,’” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 24, 2020, accessed April 27, 2020, www.eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12288638@egNews.

⁴⁸ “Teams of the Far Eastern Higher Combined Arms Command School are preparing to participate in the competitions of the Army International Games – 2020, Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 25, 2020, accessed April 26, 2020, www.eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12288729@egNews.

⁴⁹ Ryan Browne and Chandelis Duster, “Russia intercepts US Navy aircraft over Mediterranean Sea,” CNN, April 20, 2020, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/russia-intercepts-us-navy-aircraft-over-mediterranean-sea/ar-BB12V1x>; Also, Ryan Browne, “US Accuses Russia of Putting US Pilots at Risk during Aerial Encounter and Testing of Anti-satellite Missile,” CNN, April 15, 2020, accessed May 1, 2020, www.cnn.com/2020/04/15/politics/us-russia-intercept-missile-test/index.html.

⁵⁰ Ralph Ortega, “Dramatic Moment Belgian F-16 Fighters Intercept Armed Russian Jets Buzzing a US Destroyer in the Baltic Sea,” DailyMail.com, April 21, 2020, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8238705/Moment-Belgian-F-16-fighters-intercept-Russian-jets-doing-low-fly-destroyer-Baltic.html>.

NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission were launched to identify a Russian formation of two Tu-160 bombers accompanied by several fighters and an airborne early-warning aircraft. On the same day, Norwegian fighters intercepted two Russian Tu-22 bombers escorted by fighters. On the following day, Norwegian fighters twice intercepted two Russian maritime patrol aircraft.⁵¹

During this time, Ukrainian news sources linked Russia to continued levels of violence in eastern Ukraine, quoting Ukrainian Joint Forces Command press center statements that “armed formations of the Russian Federation” violated the ceasefire 16 times on April 25, 2020, and 11 times on April 26, 2020, with artillery, heavy mortars, and direct-fire weapons.⁵² While one may distinguish between the Ukrainian description of “armed formations of the Russian Federation” and the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, the continued level of violence by the Russian-backed separatists might indicate the continued support of Russian military logistics and ordnance elements.

An operational deployment of a Russian submarine to the Mediterranean demonstrated that Russian naval operations were continuing during this stage of the pandemic. The RFN's permanent Mediterranean Task Force reportedly includes two rotational Project 636.3 third-generation diesel-electric submarines from the Black Sea Fleet.⁵³ These two submarines represent one-third of the Black Sea Fleet's total inventory for this type of submarine, which consists of B-261 *Novorossiisk* (side number 555), B-237 *Rostov na Donu* (side number 556), B-262 *Starii Oskol* (side number 481), B-265 *Krasnodar* (side number 482), B-268 *Velikii Novgorod* (side number 476), and B-271 *Kolpino* (side number 485).⁵⁴ Entering service between 2014 and 2016, these “*Varshavianka*”-class submarines (NATO class “Improved Kilo”⁵⁵) are assigned to the 4th Separate Submarine Brigade (military unit number 95200) at the Novorossiisk naval

⁵¹ COVID-19 OR NOT – WE SECURE THE SKIES, Allied Air Command Public Affairs Office, NATO, April 30, 2020, accessed May 6, 2020 <https://ac.nato.int/archive/2020/covid19-or-not-we-secure-the-skies>.

⁵² “Ukraine reports 11 enemy attacks in Donbas on April 26,” UNIAN Information Agency, April 27, 2020, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.unian.info/war/donbas-war-ukraine-reports-11-enemy-attacks>.

⁵³ “Russian Navy sub embarks on deployment to Mediterranean Sea,” TASS Russian News Agency, April 27, 2020, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://tass.com/defense/1150089>. Also “Вторую “Варшавянку” Черноморского флота отправят в Средиземное море” [“The second “*Varshavianka*” of the Black Sea Fleet deploys to the Mediterranean Sea”], www.FLOT.com, April 23, 2020, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://flot.com/2020/ЧерноморскийФлот31/>.

⁵⁴ “Черноморский флот ВМФ России” [“Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Navy”], accessed May 1, 2020, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Черноморский_флот_ВМФ_России; also “4-я отдельная бригада подводных лодок” [“4th Separate Submarine Brigade”], accessed May 1, 2020, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/4-я_отдельная_бригада_подводных_лодок.

⁵⁵ “Б-237 «Ростов-на-Дону»” [“B-237 *Rostov na Donu*”], accessed May 1, 2020, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Б-237_«Ростов-на-Дону».

base.⁵⁶ The two deployed submarines operate on station with the Russian Mediterranean Task Force for an average of 18 months, crews reportedly rotating every three months.⁵⁷ In April 2019, *Starii Oskol* and *Krasnodar* replaced *Velikii Novgorod* and *Kolpino* on station. Later in the year, however, *Starii Oskol* departed station, arriving at the Kronshtadt Marine Plant in late December 2019 for repairs.⁵⁸ At that time in December 2019, *Rostov na Donu* was under scheduled dock maintenance by the Sevastopol company “*Sevmorzavod*.”⁵⁹ This submarine had previously operated as part of the permanent Mediterranean Task Force. On December 8, 2015, while submerged in the Mediterranean Sea, *Rostov na Donu* fired Kalibr cruise missiles at Islamic State targets in Raqqa, Syria.⁶⁰ In late April 2020, *Rostov na Donu* departed its base to deploy to the Mediterranean Sea Task Force.⁶¹ On April 30, 2020, the submarine reportedly dove to depths greater than 200 meters at a Black Sea naval range as part of its combat preparation.⁶² Reporting indicated that the RFN was taking preventive measures against the coronavirus throughout its submarine force. All personnel were screened daily and tested for COVID-19. Submarines preparing to sail were to undergo “anchor procedures” in which the crew was isolated on board with no physical contact with anyone ashore. After two weeks and a confirmation of no illness, the submarine would depart on mission.⁶³

⁵⁶ “Черноморский флот ВМФ России” [“Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Navy”], accessed May 1, 2020, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Черноморский_флот_ВМФ_России.

⁵⁷ “Russian Navy sub embarks on deployment to Mediterranean Sea,” TASS Russian News Agency, April 27, 2020, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://tass.com/defense/1150089>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Б-237 «Ростов-на-Дону»” [“B-237 *Rostov na Donu*”], accessed May 1, 2020, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Б-237_«Ростов-на-Дону».

⁶⁰ Россия нанесла ракетный удар по ИГ с подводной лодки из акватории Средиземного моря” [“Russia launched a missile strike on IS from a submarine in the Mediterranean Sea”], TASS Russian News Agency, December 9, 2015, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://tass.ru/politika/2509573>.

⁶¹ “Russian Navy sub embarks on deployment to Mediterranean Sea,” TASS Russian News Agency, April 27, 2020, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://tass.com/defense/1150089>.

⁶² “Экипаж подводной лодки Черноморского флота выполнил погружение на глубину свыше 200 метров” [“The crew of *Rostov na Donu* submarine of the Black Sea Fleet dived to a depth of more than 200 meters”], Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, April 30, 2020, accessed May 1, 2020, https://structure.mil.ru/structure/forces/type/navy/black_sea/news/more

⁶³ Roman Kretsul, Bogdan Stepova, and Alexey Ramm, “Корабли стоят для подводников ввели строгие правила профилактики” [“Ships stand: strict rules of prevention have been introduced for submariners”], Izvestia, April 30, 2020, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://iz.ru/1006171/roman-kretsul-bogdan-stepovoi-aleksei-ramm/korabli-postoiat-dlia-podvodnikov-vveli-strogie-pravila-profilaktiki>.

4. Conclusion

Analysis of the Russian government's initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a military that is supporting, but not in charge of, the national response. While Deputy Minister of Defense General Dimitry Bulgakov serves as the defense representative on the coronavirus Coordination Council, neither he, nor any other military leader, participates in the Operational Center for the Prevention of the Arrival and Spread of New Coronavirus Infection. This level of support—building hospitals, training medical specialists, and executing a disinfection campaign of critical infrastructure across the country—appears to fall in line with current Russian national strategy, but also allows the military to maintain distance from any potential criticism of the national response.

Led by the personal example of Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu, who previously led the Ministry of Emergency Situations for more than 16 years, the Russian Armed Forces appear to have adopted an aggressive employment of personal protective equipment while remaining focused on the execution of critical readiness and operational tasks. Despite the challenges of the summer conscription period and the demands of supporting the national COVID response, the Russian Armed Forces have continued to keep units training, Russian aviation has maintained its aggressive confrontation of NATO-member air and maritime forces, and Russian maritime forces have sustained their operational deployments. President Putin had such confidence in Minister Shoygu and the Armed Forces that he deployed them in conjunction with other elements of national power as part of very visible international-response operations to portray Russian in a positive light while undermining the image of NATO members.

This paper focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the Russian military during only the initial months of the pandemic. The longer term impact—on the execution of major annual exercises, the conduct of the winter conscription period, and the supporting military-industrial complex's ability to deliver equipment—remains to be seen and is left to further research. The personal impact on Minister of Defense Shoygu also remains an open question. Shoygu has positioned himself well to keep both his personal and his Armed Forces' approval rating at a high level. While the crisis is far from over in Russia, Shoygu has maintained his image of an effective manager and continued to survive the political intrigues in Putin's Russia by carefully picking the manner in which, and when, the Russian Armed Forces engage publicly in the fight against COVID-19. But perhaps the biggest threat to Shoygu likely lies in the longer term success or failure of the conscription and large-scale exercises this year. Should the military fall drastically behind in the call-up or if there are massive outbreaks at military bases due to the influx of new conscripts, the

military will suffer both a public relations problem and a real combat-readiness problem. While President Putin may attempt to successfully convey an international image that under his leadership, Russia was able to survive the pandemic far more capably and with far less dislocation than the West, a crisis in his military would visibly counteract his efforts.

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