COVID-19 and the Russian Regional Response: Blame Diffusion and Attitudes to Pandemic Governance

Matthew Blackburn, University of Warsaw[1]
Derek Hutcheson, Malmö University, Sweden[2]
Bo Petersson, Malmö University, Sweden[3]
Elena Tsumarova, North-West Institute of Management Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Russia[4]

Abstract

As was the case with other federal states, Russia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was decentralized and devolved responsibility to regional governors. Contrary to the common highly centralized governance in Russia, this approach is thought to have helped insulate the government from criticism. Using local research and analysis based on a national representative survey carried out at the height of the pandemic during the summer of 2021, the article charts the public response to the pandemic across Russia. It examines the regionalization of the response, with an in-depth focus on two of the Russian cities with the highest infection rates but differing responses to the pandemic: St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk. There are two main findings: at one level, the diffusion of responsibility meant little distinction was made between the different levels of government by the population; at another level, approval of the pandemic measures was tied strongly to trust levels in central and regional government.

[1] Matthew Blackburn is a fellow at the Department of Political Science at the University of Warsaw and an affiliated researcher at the Institute of Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University.
[2] Derek Hutcheson is professor of political science at Malmö University, Sweden.
[3] Bo Petersson is Professor of Political Science and co-director of the research platform Russia, Ukraine and the Caucasus Regional Research (RUCARR) at Malmö University, Sweden.
[4] Elena Tsumarova is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Comparative Political Studies North-West Institute of Management Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration.

Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic presented a serious challenge to political systems across the globe, the very criteria for success in COVID-19 governance are divisive. How to weigh saving lives and avoiding the overloading of hospitals against economic damage, mental health crises, and the violation of civil liberties? The question of which countries have paid too high a price or persisted with ineffective measures for too long remains vital for future pandemic management and discussions about the relative strengths and weaknesses of democratic and autocratic governance.

Early observations about the benefits of autocratic rule for COVID-19 management have not been borne out; democracies and autocracies alike experienced outbreaks and overwhelmed healthcare systems. Lockdowns and vaccination drives have involved different methods in autocratic and democratic contexts, but the results have varied in ways that suggest factors other than political regime type are important. The focus of this article is on the Russian Federation, whose special brand of electoral authoritarianism has previously been understood by many as being halfway between liberal democracy and closed authoritarianism. During the COVID-19 pandemic, contradictory trends were observed in Russian politics, with the devolution of COVID-19 governance to the regions combined with hyper-centralizing constitutional reforms further empowering the president and a wave of repressive laws enforced against political opposition and civil society in 2021.

This article examines the extent to which the delegation of responsibility to the regions affected levels of public trust in the state's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and explores how variations in COVID-19 policies played out in regional case studies. The main empirical question is whether the delegation of responsibility to the regions led to successful displacement or a sharing of the blame for the management of the crisis. This article examines the public reaction to COVID-19 governance through surveys on nationwide and regional levels as well as an in-depth focus on Russia's second-largest city, St. Petersburg, and the provincial capital of Petrozavodsk. This article uses these layers to analyze the public response to the anti-pandemic measures and the regional diversity of the approaches to it.

The authors of this article find that policy responses to COVID-19 were highly regionalized but that people tended not to differentiate between federal and regional authorities when it came to the responsibility for handling the crisis. The authors argue that this reflects broader attitudes to governance and the state in Russia. Trust in the respective levels of government was the largest predictor of approval of COVID-19 governance; this suggests that the Kremlin's devolution approach to COVID-19 management was relatively successful. Overall, this article identifies a relationship between less invasive COVID-19 governance and higher COVID-19 governance approval ratings, which suggests that limits on state intervention in everyday life are still an important component of the 'social contract' behind the Putin system. Nonetheless, with developments surrounding the war in Ukraine and the mobilization of military reserves in the autumn of 2022, that 'social contract' is surely now under more serious pressure in the post-COVID period.

Electoral authoritarianism and COVID-19 governance: Framing the Russian case

During the first phases of the pandemic, political leaders across the globe seemed markedly indecisive and devoid of clear strategies of action (Arukwe 2022). There was a general tendency for authoritarian regimes to react later and harder to the pandemic than more democratic ones

(Nelson 2021). Electoral authoritarian regimes such as Russia, Iran, and Kazakhstan hardly distinguished themselves as successful managers of the pandemic (Åslund 2020). Intuitively, one could explain this by pointing out that electoral authoritarianism lacks the key advantages of both liberal democratic and closed authoritarian states. Electoral authoritarianism, with its flaunting of democratic practices, lacks liberal democracies' strengths in information capacity, which, through openness on gathering and disseminating key data, serves to combat pandemics. Electoral authoritarianism also lacks the advantages of closed authoritarian states that can use full coercive capacity to enforce strict measures to curb their spread (Mao 2021). Electoral authoritarianism regimes thus risk falling in between the two poles and excelling in neither domain.

To determine Russia's position as electoral authoritarianism at the time of this study (2020-21),[5] there are three points that this article aims to make on governance, social trust, and legitimacy in Russia. The first is that the system has been rather resilient and broadly achieved the consent of the governed (Greene and Robertson 2019; Loftus 2022) with polling data showing increased trust in certain parts of the state in comparison with the Yeltsin period (Levada 2021) and broader agreement with the Kremlin's statist agenda (Volkov and Kolesnikov 2018). Secondly, in contrast to closed authoritarian systems like China, Russia has, prior to 2021-22, had a less invasive state. State responses to protests have been selective and not uniformly repressive (Greene 2014). Thirdly, the basic restoration of state capacity and the delivery of basic state outputs, while below the level expected in many Western countries, has been considered an acceptable compromise between an invasive Soviet-style state and the erratic liberal reforming state of the 1990s in much of Russian society.

It is clear that the basic achievements of holding Russia together and having a functional state, things not considered urgent in most Western societies, are marked as key achievements by the president amongst both Russian elites and the masses. The strength of these statist priorities, visible in polling data, and the rather minimalistic expectations toward the state, must be kept in mind in our understanding of responses to COVID-19 governance. To summarize the social contract (at least as it existed until the start of war in Ukraine in 2022) – the president or regime ensures the state is "strong" insofar as territorial integrity, social order, macro-economic stability, national independence, and great power status are retained. Meanwhile, the people put up with corruption, weak institutions, and governance-related problems with the proviso that the state does not become too invasive or predatory to them as individuals. Issues such as democratization, civil rights, the rule of law, and improving institutions are tacitly understood to be off the agenda.

The political context of the Coronavirus pandemic and Russia's model of federalism

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, economic stagnation, falling approval ratings (Levada 2022), and question marks over President Vladimir Putin's political future after his fourth presidential term (2018-24) cast clouds over the Kremlin's political agenda for 2020. In a step that sought to regain political momentum, Putin announced sweeping constitutional changes in January 2020. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic partly interfered with this agenda, forcing Putin to cancel several of his 2020 planned events and conduct his affairs from

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[5] Here we must add the caveat that since the outbreak of the intensified war on Ukraine at the end of February 2022, there is evidence Russia is shifting to a closed authoritarian system. This is, however, subsequent to our article's timescale (03.2020-01.2022), and we argue that Russia remained an electoral authoritarian regime during the period we examined.

his office over video link (Blackburn and Petersson 2021). This approach was out of step with the image Putin had promoted over the last two decades as a brave and decisive man of action (Frye 2021; Petersson 2021). In the end, he spent close to a year in a specially constructed underground facility – a point capitalized on by Alexey Navalny, who lampooned the president as an "old man in a bunker," fearful of contracting the disease.

With Putin taking a back seat, the stage was seemingly set for regional governors to show what they could do. Two factors played a role in the decentralization of the responsibility for managing the pandemic: the country's size (a single policy devised in Moscow surely could not apply uniformly to regions several thousand kilometres away) and the question of where responsibility (or blame) would lie. By the presidential decree originally issued on April 2, 2020, the regional governors of the Russian Federation were mandated to "implement a set of restrictive and other measures aimed at ensuring the sanitary and epidemiological well-being of the population within the boundaries of their territories" (Presidential Decree 2020). Russia's decentralized approach followed the model of many other federal countries by sharing the management of the pandemic between the centre and the constituent federal subjects and delegating significant authority downwards (Chattopadhyay et al. 2022).

Yet, in the Russian case, some key points must be made about the nature of centre-region relations and why this approach stood out. Firstly, from his very first years as president, Putin has deployed centralized methods of state-building to wrest power back from the regions, reducing their autonomy stage by stage (Busygina 2016).[6] While constitutional amendments brought about the hyper-centralization of power in 2020, the decentralization of COVID-19 governance should be seen as an exceptional short-term measure rather than any permanent reform of federalism in administrative or fiscal terms (Burkhardt 2020).

Secondly, by making regional governors accountable for the management of the crisis, the central authorities could shift blame downwards (Smyth et al. 2020; Blackburn and Petersson 2021; Terzyan 2021; Shirikov et al 2023). The simple rationale was that the political centre takes the credit for impressive nation-level achievements while regional leaders, deprived of sufficient resources, are the ready-made fall guys when chaos and disorder strike at the local level (Busygina 2019; Smyth et al. 2020; Malinova 2020; Petersson 2021). This reserves the privilege of the president to step in at the very last moment and seemingly put things right.

Thirdly, over the last ten years, being in the position of regional governor has increasingly reflected not the approval of the local population but of the Kremlin. For example, between 2017-2019, more than two-thirds of governors were removed (Ivanov and Petrov 2021) and often replaced by outsiders with strong Kremlin connections (but no local roots) that were parachuted into regional leadership roles. Regional governors of this new type simply cannot be expected to contradict the president or enter into public disputes with the federal centre. They conform to the key positions of state media on most issues and accept the primacy of key federal prerogatives, gaining, in return, a free hand in other matters. This loyalty is unsurprising, such governors owe their positions to the political centre and their fate is very much tied up with that of the president and the political system as a whole. The authors of this article agree with Busygina and Filippov (2021) that the regional authorities are essentially no less invested in maintaining the stability of the system than the Kremlin itself.

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[6] Direct gubernatorial elections were abolished in 2004, and when they were restored in 2012, this included a municipal and presidential filter to easily exclude unacceptable oppositional candidates (Blakkisrud 2015, 115).

The conformity of regional governors should be noted. No governors broke ranks at any stage to complain about a lack of resources or criticize the federal authorities. They all followed the order to conduct the July referendum on constitutional amendments in 2020, regardless of the situation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic in their region. A comparison of excess mortality and reported COVID statistics indicated that many of them appear to have manipulated COVID-19 death statistics to ensure conformity to the narratives in state media (Busygina and Filippov 2021; Kofanov et al., forthcoming). The image presented of a unified power vertical without dissenters is combined with deliberate distortion of Russia's COVID-19 response, which is bound to have an effect on public opinion.

Research design and hypotheses

To investigate attitudes on state management of COVID-19, the authors of this article examine three levels: (1) the nationwide attitudes toward how federal and (2) regional authorities handled the pandemic seen in an aggregate perspective across Russia; (3) a specific qualitative focus on two case studies: St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk. There has been near-universal acknowledgement for centuries that legitimate government rests on trust between the rulers and the ruled (Newton et al. 2017). At the most basic level, trust is "the belief that others will, so far as they can, look after our interests, that they will not take advantage or harm us" (Newton 1999, 170). Central to this study are four hypotheses that connect the population's trust in the respective levels of government with their expectations of policy delivery when it comes to COVID-19 governance:

- H1: it would be expected that those who trust the federal authorities more than the regional ones are more likely to approve how federal authorities handled the COVID-19 pandemic.

- H2: conversely, those who trust the regional authorities more than the federal ones will give more credit for handling it well to the regional authorities.

- H3: support for federal measures will be positively correlated with trust in the federal government.

- H4: support for regional measures will be positively correlated with trust in the regional government.

To assess the above hypotheses, data are used from a specially commissioned national representative survey conducted in the Russian Federation in June 2021 (Malmö University/Levada-Center 2021). Fieldwork was conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews conducted in Russian in a representative set of 97 urban and 40 rural locations from June 17-28, 2021. The survey contained 28 questions (plus demographic information). It was commissioned by Malmö University and carried out by the Levada Center, Russia's leading independent sociological company. The national representative sample size was N=1623, with a deepened representative sample at the city level in three major cities (St. Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, and Petrozavodsk) of 300 or 301 respondents, respectively. In total, the weighted sample size was N=2525. The refusal rate was 42 percent, and the margin of error is not more than +/- 3.4 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. Despite the issues of surveying public opinion in authoritarian countries (Robinson and Tannenberg 2019), the authors of this article

have reasons to assume that the survey results in this article are not overly affected by these factors.[7]

In two separate questions, respondents were asked about how effective they thought the federal (the president and Russian government) and regional authorities (governor and government of the federal subject) had been in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic on a four-point scale (very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, extremely ineffective). In addition, there was a battery of questions on people's trust in Russian political institutions as well as their interest in politics. Respondents were asked to assess "to what extent [they] trust[ed]" each of the institutions on a seven-point ascending scale.

St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk are appropriate as case studies for a number of reasons. At least on the basis of the official figures, the country's second city and the Republic of Karelia (of which Petrozavodsk is the capital) were two of the top three federal subjects in Russia in the relative infection rates per one million of the population.[8] The choice of these two cities as case studies is also justifiable in their geographic proximity in the Northwestern Federal District and the similarity of the epidemiological patterns in this geographical area (Gladkikh et al. 2022).[9]

The pandemic: epidemiological and political impacts on the nationwide level

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[7] First, the national representative survey is conducted using random probability sampling, removing any bias from self-selection. Second, the questions on COVID and trust in different levels of government were asked as supplementary questions in a survey that was about the relatively politically uncontentious matter of urban governance and city use during COVID. Third, though Russia has long had electoral authoritarian tendencies and non-systemic political opposition has been marginalized, it is only since the start of the war in Ukraine that there has been a widespread crackdown on dissenting views amongst the general population. Finally, the empirical facts from the survey itself (and others like it) indicate that 38 percent of respondents said that they "did not trust" the president, and 32 percent said that they "did not approve" of Putin's policies as president. These are higher than the numbers who actively voted for a candidate other than Putin in the 2018 presidential election – indicating that people are, at best, no more reluctant to admit to dissenting political views in a survey than at the ballot box. Moreover, the long-running series of approval 'ratings' of Putin's actions conducted by the same polling agency (Levada) shows fluctuations that map clearly onto real political events (for example, falling after the 2011-12 election protests and the 2018 pension reform and rising after the annexation of Crimea in 2014). In other words, at least until the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022, there was evidence that representative surveys reflected trends in public opinion, both upwards and downwards.

[8] Based on comparative figures at https://russian-trade.com/coronavirus-russia/?ysclid=lbt5u2rqmq241548499 (accessed December 18, 2022) compared with official population statistics from the Russian State Statistical Agency (Rosstat 2022). St. Petersburg's official total of over 1.5 million confirmed cases from March 2020 to July 2022 was the highest relative rate of infection of any federal subject, encompassing 28.5 percent of the population. The Republic of Karelia, with its capital Petrozavodsk, had a relative infection rate of 22.5 percent of the population, placing it third. Since those figures reflect only positive test numbers (and not every ill person that is tested), it is highly likely that the actual numbers are underreported, as they are in most countries. Nonetheless, these verified figures represent the *minimum* numbers of people who actually contracted COVID-19 or died from it and hence still point to the illness as a substantial public health issue. A further important caveat is that there were significant question marks over the reliability of Russian infection and death statistics (Dixon 2021; Timonin et al. 2021). St. Petersburg's and Karelia's relatively high numbers may be down to better reporting or less falsification in these regions than in others. Updated figures beyond July 2022 can be found at https://russian-trade.com/coronavirus-russia/respublika-kareliya/ and https://russian-trade.com/coronavirus-russia/sankt-peterburg/.

[9] There is a necessary caveat—applicable in many countries—that the positive case numbers do not necessarily represent the exact pattern of infected people due to limited testing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has so far come in five distinct waves across Russia, starting with the initial pandemic in the spring of 2020 that led to the first flurry of restrictions on mobility (particularly in Moscow), which were eased in time for the popular vote on the constitutional changes in June/July 2020. Several further peaks followed, as shown in figure 1.

In a country as large as Russia, there was inevitably some regional variation in the ebbs and flows of the pandemic and its impact on the population. The early reactions to the pandemic focused on restrictive measures to create social distancing tailored to local specificities by regional governments. While the effects of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia were not overwhelming in terms of infection and mortality rates, it brought serious economic hardship. The Russian government was not willing to alleviate this hardship with any serious support measures. Macroeconomic stability and security were prioritized as opposed to offering large handouts or furloughs, which surely would have been popular with the public. Initial polling did not show a particularly impressive gain in approval ratings for the Russian government in handling the COVID-19 pandemic (Levada 2021), unlike many other countries, which saw substantial (if often short-lived) increases in approval ratings for the incumbent governments (Yam et al. 2020). Instead, approval ratings for the Russian president fell from 68 percent in January 2020 to 59 percent in April 2020, recovering to 69 percent in September 2020 and fluctuating in the 65-69 percent range from November 2020 to January 2022. Taking the 67 percent approval rating from January 2020 as a starting point, approval ratings for regional governors, assigned responsibility for the pandemic's management, declined to 58 percent by July 2020 but remained around 60-62 percent for the first half of 2021 until falling back to the 57-59 range until January 2022 (Levada 2021).

In the pandemic's second half, more emphasis was put on mitigating COVID-19 via vaccination. Despite being the first country in the world to license a vaccine—and having three domestically produced vaccines (GamCovidVak – Sputnik V, Covivak, EpivakCorona) to choose from—there was relatively slow vaccine uptake within Russia compared to many Western European states (Maleva et al. 2021). Thus, like most other countries around the world, Russia introduced anti-COVID measures on epidemiological grounds that simultaneously had restrictive effects on civil liberties and damaged the economy (Barceló et al. 2022). Surprisingly, however, Russia ended up relaxing restrictions quicker than many other states, did not declare a state of emergency, or return to uniform nationwide lockdowns.

Interestingly, a year into the pandemic, a comparative poll (Gallup International 2021) showed Russia to be in fourth place globally in terms of citizens unwilling to sacrifice their human rights to try and prevent the spread of COVID-19 (39 percent) and in second place in unwillingness to take a vaccine if it was available (46 percent). The Public Relations Development Agency (*Kompaniya razvitiya obshchestvennykh svyazei* – KROS), which prepares the "National Index of Anxiety" four times a year, found that by the last quarter of 2021, fear of QR-code rules actually displaced COVID-19 as the main concern of Russians (KROS 2021). This sentiment, which rejects an invasive state and prefers the private sphere to be left intact, was seemingly ignored in measures to force vaccination via employers and bills to introduce QR-code legislation in the State Duma in November 2021. The latter provoked small-scale protests involving approximately 60-200 people in towns and cities across Russia (Lomakina 2021). The authorities ultimately abandoned this more invasive federal legislation, showing the limits of the state's ambition in COVID-19 governance when confronted with signs of serious dissent.

Figure 1: Daily COVID case numbers 2020-22
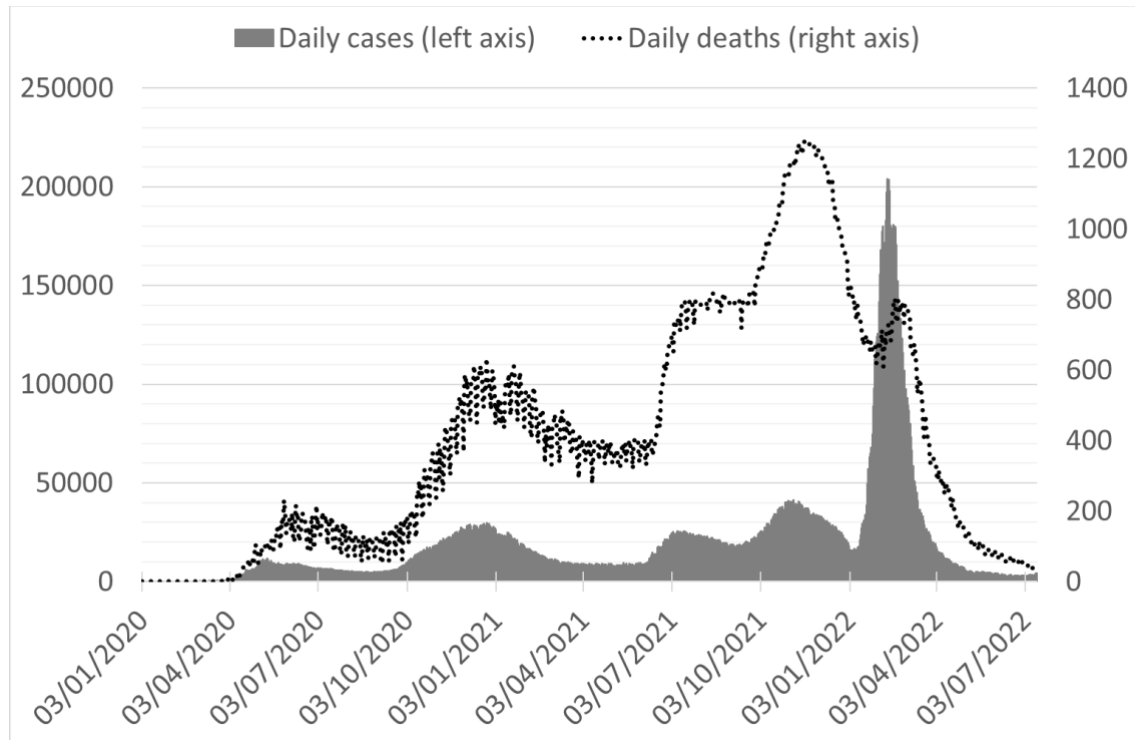
Source: World Health Organization, https://COVID19.who.int/data, accessed July 16, 2022.

The survey was carried out at approximately the mid-point of the overall pandemic cycle in June 2021. At the time, just over a year had passed since the initial first wave, and the second wave of winter 2020-21 had receded. A few weeks after the survey—in July 2021—there was a further outbreak of new infections. Thus, the survey measured satisfaction with the authorities' responses at a point when the initial lockdowns had receded into memory and before there was widespread controversy over vaccine mandates or QR-code/COVID passport usage. The focus is, therefore, on people's approval of the authorities' actions during the first year of lockdowns and other sanitary measures.

Opinion was evenly split at the most basic level on how well the authorities had dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic, as Table 1 shows. Only a small number thought that either the federal or regional authorities had dealt with the pandemic "very" effectively (16 and 12 percent, respectively), but the majority across Russia—just over three-fifths of respondents—thought the federal authorities' response has been more effective than ineffective. Only slightly fewer thought the same about their regional governments. A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between the two variables (assessments of the effectiveness of federal and regional authorities, respectively). There was a strong statistically significant positive correlation between the perceptions of both levels' responses ($\tau_b = 0.690$, $p < .001$). This indicates, preliminarily, that people did not make as much differentiation between the two levels of government as initially might have been expected.

Table 1: "How do you assess the effectiveness of the federal authorities (President and the Russian government) and the regional authorities (governor and government of your

province / republic / krai /city of federal importance) in the fight against coronavirus?"
(Percent of respondents, excluding "don't know")

	Federal authorities	Regional authorities
Very effective	16	13
Rather effective	46	47
Rather ineffective	25	27
Very ineffective	13	14
Total	100	100
N=	2341	2332

Source: Malmö University/Levada Center Survey 2021, q.17 and q.18. Margin of error +/-3.4 percent at 95% confidence interval.

Firstly, the authors disaggregated individual respondents' views on COVID-19 performances of the two levels of government relative to each other.[10] Though this did not allow the authors to measure the attitudes toward any *particular* regional government (which will be returned to later in the detailed focus on two regions), it gives a general nationwide picture of the perceptions about the two levels of government. Overall, the difference is not substantial. In 74 percent of cases, respondents held the same perception of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic of both levels of government.[11]

Turning to the hypotheses, the authors found evidence for the first two in table 2: people who trusted one level of government more than the other were more inclined to rate the effectiveness of that level's attempts to deal with the pandemic positively relative to the other. In the majority of cases, people saw both levels of government as being equally effective and expressed the same levels of trust in each. However, amongst the minority that trusted one level of government more than the other, a slightly larger proportion of them approved of that level's management of the pandemic more than the other levels.

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[10] The respondents' scores (on a scale of 1 to 4) for the two questions (respectively) about the federal and respective regional authorities were subtracted from each other using the formula 'COVID-Diff' = q.17 [Federal authorities] – q.18 [regional authorities]. The scale was descending, meaning that "1" indicated a high degree of effectiveness and "4" the lowest. Negative scores indicate that the federal government was seen as more effective, positive ones indicate the opposite. The maximum score is +3 (federal authorities very ineffective and regional authorities very effective) and the minimum is -3 (federal authorities very effective and regional authorities very ineffective). For question wording, see Table 1.

[11] Of the quarter of the sample who did not share this view, slightly more (16 percent compared with 11 percent) thought that the federal authorities had performed better than the regional ones, but the distribution was almost normally distributed around a mean just below zero (mean = -0.08 and standard deviation = 0.65). In short, perceptions of the two levels did not vary strongly.

Table 2: Assessments of COVID measure effectiveness relative to trust in federal and regional governments (percent of respondents, excluding 'don't know') [12]

Trust	Federal more effective	Both levels same	Regional more effective	Total (trust)	N=
Trust regional more	9	75	16	100	467
Same trust in each	14	78	9	100	1182
Trust federal more	23	68	9	100	512
Total (effectiveness)	15	75	10	100	2161

Source: own calculations deriving from Malmö University/Levada Center Survey 2021, q.17 and q.18. Margin of error +/-3.4 percent. Correlation between the two variables: $\tau b = 0.134$, $p < .001$

It should be noted that the authors have hitherto examined the *relative* levels of trust in the two levels of government, not the *absolute* trust levels. Now, the levels of trust in Russian institutions, particularly the federal and regional governments, will be examined.[13] Hypotheses 3 and 4 suggested that approval of the COVID-19 measures of the respective levels of government would be positively correlated with trust in those levels of government. At the federal level (hypothesis 3), 85 percent of those who trusted the president and 87 percent of those who trusted the Russian government thought that the federal authorities had dealt with the crisis 10ffecttively, including more than a quarter who thought that it had been dealt with "very effectively."[14] By contrast, only a minority (31 percent and 38 percent, respectively) of those who *did not* trust these institutions felt positively inclined in their assessments of the COVID-19 measures.[15] There was a statistically significant positive correlation between the levels of trust in the Russian government and satisfaction with the federal government's response ($\tau_b = 0.444$, $p < .001$).

There was a very similar pattern when it came to attitudes toward the regional authorities' COVID-19 measures. Of those that trusted their regional authorities, 84 percent thought that their measures dealing with the pandemic had been effective. By contrast, 62 percent of those that did not trust the authorities felt that the measures had been ineffective. The relationship between trust in the respective regional government and satisfaction with the regional response was slightly weaker than for the federal government but still positive and statistically significant ($\tau_b = 0.386$, $p < .001$). Thus, there is preliminary evidence to suggest that hypotheses 3 and 4 have some validity: trust in the respective authorities connects with approval for their actions.

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[12] Trust was measured on a seven-point scale, where "1" represented the lowest level of trust.

[13] On a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1 is the lowest level of trust), the mean scores for seven institutions ranged from 3.0 (State Duma) to 4.35 (president). The federal and regional governments had mean scores of 3.70 (standard deviation of 2.11) and 3.62 (standard deviation of 1.95), respectively. The other institutions were the police, the army, and the local authorities, which had means between 3.57 and 3.70.

[14] "Trust" and "distrust" are respectively taken to be points 1-3 and 5-7 of the seven-point ascending trust scale (4 is considered to indicate neither trust nor distrust). Overall, 38.2 percent and 34.6 percent, respectively, indicated "trust" (a score between 5 and 7) in the federal and regional governments, compared with 52.1 percent who trusted the president. "Effectively" includes those who considered the authorities' response to be "very effective" or "somewhat effective" (points 1 and 2 on a four-point descending scale), while "ineffectively" combines the other two categories ("rather ineffective" and "very ineffective," points 3-4 on the same scale). The "don't know" responses were excluded.

[15] There was a positive Spearman rank correlation (when the differing directions of the scales were accounted for) of 0.528 and 0.522, respectively (significan at the p<0.01 level) between assessments of the federal authorities' handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the levels of trust in the president and federal government. The original seven-point and four-point scales were used for the correlation coefficient rather than the simplified scales mentioned above.

There could, of course, be many other factors that lie behind the public's approval for authorities' actions on COVID and the authors needed to control for them. To examine this in more detail, the authors turn to two multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses, one each in which the dependent variables are—respectively—the levels of approval of the federal and regional authorities' actions in dealing with COVID-19.[16] A number of independent variables are included:

- Trust in the respective authorities.

- Efficacy: two questions that ask about the extent to which ordinary people feel they can influence the federal and regional authorities (respectively) are included in the models.

- Frequency of media usage: the authors hypothesize that frequent viewing/reading of state media will impact positively on approval for the authorities' actions regarding the pandemic at the respective levels.[17]

- Interest in politics: people's general interest in politics may also be connected to their attitudes toward the authorities' handling of COVID-19 – given that the restrictions were not just public health measures but also political decisions.

- Two measures of economic welfare: size of house/apartment and self-perceived current economic situation. The smaller a person's dwelling (number of rooms), the more likely they would arguably have felt the spatially restrictive nature of the self-isolation measures. Those in a poorer economic situation may have also suffered more from the economic shocks of the pandemic and the disruptions to work.

- In both models, a range of socio-demographic factors is included as controls – sex, age, and education level. The authors can hypothesize that older people—who were more objectively vulnerable to serious symptoms or mortality from COVID-19—would have been more likely to approve of restrictions put in place to protect public health and that better-educated people would have had more understanding of the dynamics of the pandemic.

The full list of variables is provided in Appendix 1 (pg. 25).

The results are shown in Table 3. For ease of comparison, the models for federal and regional governments are presented in a single table. However, they refer to two slightly different models regressed to the dependent variables of approval of the authorities' action at the respective state levels. The table lists the standardized beta coefficients from Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) multivariate regression analysis. Models 1a and 1b refer to the effectiveness of the federal

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[16] The federal government, rather than Putin personally, was formally in charge of the pandemic response, and hence it is trust in the government rather than the president that is used as the dependent variable.

[17] As is well documented, the Russian media market is dominated by state-owned or state-loyal television and printed outlets (Hutcheson 2018). In the survey, 72 percent of respondents said that they "regularly" or "sometimes" watched national state television, and 62 percent said the same about regional television. Newspaper readership is much lower (but with slightly more people reading regional rather than national press): only 20 percent said that they regularly or sometimes read federal newspapers and 24 percent looked at regional press (Malmö University/Levada Center Survey 2021, q.27). Whilst the media generally lack the critical role of Western media, in circumstances such as during the pandemic, they also serve as semi-official sources of public information.

authorities in dealing with COVID-19, and models 2a and 2b use the effectiveness of the regional authorities in the respondents' regions as their dependent variable.

Focusing first on people's satisfaction with the federal authorities' COVID-19 measures, there are statistically significant relationships between the dependent variables and some of the demographic factors. As predicted, older people, people who perceived their families to be materially better off, and people who lived in larger dwellings were more likely to regard the federal government's approach to COVID-19 as effective. Interestingly, individuals with lower levels of education were slightly *more* likely to regard the measures as effective, perhaps reflecting a less critical examination of the government's pronouncements on the matter. Collectively, however, the coefficient of determination shows that these socio-demographic factors account for only 5 percent or so of the variance.

Once attitudinal questions are added to the model, the model obtains more explanatory power (Adj. R^2 = 0.308). By far, the biggest predictor of a person's attitude toward the effectiveness of the federal authorities in dealing with COVID-19 was their inherent trust in the federal government. The respondent's sense of efficacy played the next-biggest role. In other words, the assessments of the COVID-19 measures were largely related to whether a person expected the government to make the right decisions and felt part of the governing system of the country. The extent to which a respondent followed state television or used the Internet seems to have played little role in their attitudes toward the restrictions, though there is a statistically significant (but minimal) correlation between newspaper readership and attitudes to the government's actions. This perhaps indicates that frequent newspaper readers were slightly less likely to approve of pandemic restrictions, which may arise from the fact that printed media tend to be slightly less indiscriminate than visual media.

Table 3: OLS regression, predictors of attitudes toward effectiveness of COVID-19 pandemic measures (standardized Beta coefficients), all-Russia sample

	Effectiveness of federal authorities		Effectiveness of regional authorities	
	1a	1b	2a	2b
Adj. R^2	0.054	0.308	0.039	0.218
Sex	0.065**	0.010	0.097**	0.046*
Age	0.150**	0.059**	0.095**	0.040
Education	-0.073**	-0.048**	-0.081**	-0.063**
House size	0.025	0.053**	-0.008	0.024
Family financial situation	-0.166**	-0.045*	-0.188**	-0.084**
Trust Russian govt		0.430**		
Trust regional authorities				0.394**
Influence on federal authorities		-0.144**		
Influence on regional authorities				-0.109**
Interest in politics		0.003		0.067**
Read federal newspapers		0.047*		
Read regional newspapers				-0.041**
Watches federal TV		-0.138		
Watches regional TV				-0.077**
Uses Internet		0.012		0.031

Source: own calculations deriving from Malmö University/Levada Center Survey 2021. N=2525. Significance levels: *p<0.05; **p<0.01

Turning to the question of what predicts approval of regional authorities' actions in managing the pandemic, a similar pattern emerges. The same (weak) relationship exists between attitudes

toward pandemic restrictions, age, and financial standing. Once again, levels of trust in the regional authorities and perceived influence over them are the largest predictors of whether a person thought that their regional government had handled the COVID-19 pandemic effectively. However, these explain less of the variance for regional than for federal authority approval.[18]

Taken together, the evidence above indicates that hypotheses 1 to 4 also hold when controlling for other factors. Nationwide, there was a significant connection between people's evaluations of the effectiveness of pandemic restrictions and their trust in the authorities. Moreover, those who had greater trust in one or the other level of government were more inclined to evaluate that level of government's COVID-19 restrictions more favourably. However, the differences in perceptions of responsibility between the two levels were not large – indicating that the 'blame displacement' game perhaps worked, in reality, more like 'blame diffusion' (or credit-sharing): voters regarded both levels of government as being roughly equally responsible for dealing with the pandemic.

The regionalization of COVID-19 measures

Hitherto, the authors of the article have primarily examined the picture of the country as a whole. However, as noted earlier, the response to the spread of COVID-19 was strongly regionalized, and this article now turns to the sub-national level. Russia covers an eighth of the world's land mass and ranges at one extreme from densely packed metropoles (Moscow has a population density of nearly 5000 persons per square kilometre) to remote wilderness (Chukotka has only 0.07 persons per square kilometre). It would thus have been surprising if the pandemic measures had been uniform across the country.

How to characterize the range of regional responses? The expert foundation "Petersburg Politics" attempted a systematization of early regional pandemic measures, arriving at a rating of "virus sovereignty" based on the correlation between the level of COVID-19 transmission and the restrictions in regions over the first month of the pandemic (Petersburg Politics Foundation 2021) Three groups of regions were identified: (1) a high level of "virus sovereignty" – regions in which people's mobility inside and between regions was limited as the regions were practically sealed off (The Republic of Chechnya, Chelyabinsk Province, Astrakhan' Province, the Republic of Karelia); (2) a middle level that included regions in which restrictions dealt with regulations of trade or special passes to leave one's home (Rostov Province, Kemerovo Province, St. Petersburg); (3) the lowest level of "virus sovereignty": regions with minimal restrictions such as a self-isolation regime with recommendations not to leave the region (Tambov Province, Republic of Udmurtia, Yaroslavl Province). Following this rating, it is evident that at least during the first wave of the pandemic, the Republic of Karelia had a high level of "virus sovereignty," while St. Petersburg had a middle one. However, as the pandemic developed, the very strong restrictions in Karelia were not repeated in future waves, while in St. Petersburg, strong restrictions were maintained for a long period of time.

Notwithstanding the strong parallels when it came to the epidemiological side of the pandemic, the public policy response differed. During the first wave of the pandemic in St. Petersburg, initial measures were similar to those taken in Moscow and most regions of the country:

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[18] Interestingly, there was a small but statistically significant effect from following regional television – possibly accruing from the fact that regional news tended to focus more on concrete restrictions in particular places rather than the more general macro-level COVID-19 news in the national media.

students in schools and kindergartens were allowed to choose whether or not to physically attend (they were later transferred to an online format); mass events (initially containing over 1,000 attendees), visits to entertainment and shopping centers, bars and restaurants were banned.[19] In Petrozavodsk's first wave, a number of restrictions were also adopted against the rapid spread of the new infection, such as suspending public transport, tourist activities, and enforcing a lockdown and tightening controls on entry to the region.

By the summer of 2020, restrictions were gradually eased in both St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk. From May 11 onwards, restrictions were relaxed in Petrozavodsk in preparation for the nationwide vote on constitutional amendments that was held from June 25 to July 1. The only recommendations remaining were the wearing of masks indoors, sanitizing public spaces, and maintaining social distance. However, no control over the observance of these recommendations was implemented. In St. Petersburg, some of the measures were cancelled by the end of June; the majority of enterprises were able to return to work as long as they complied with the restrictions, such as limits on the number of customers inside of a business and the maintenance of at least 1.5-metre distance between the customers. At the same time, the city authorities organized special events dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War, despite the existing ban on mass events (Government of St. Petersburg 2020).

By contrast with Karelia, the most serious restrictions were imposed in St. Petersburg during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall of 2020 (Postanovlenie 2020b). These restrictions mostly concerned restaurants and bars, which were prohibited from operating after 10:00 pm. At the end of November 2020, the authorities closed all cultural and entertainment institutions. Also, from December 30th, 2020 to January 3, 2021 all restaurants, bars, and cultural and entertainment establishments were ordered to be shut down. Such harsh measures caused discontent among entrepreneurs, who declared their intention to ignore the announced requirements to save their businesses. A "Map of Resistance" was organized, on which the restaurants and bars that ignored the restrictions were marked (Mingazov 2021).

It is noteworthy that the authorities in Petrozavodsk did not return to restrictions in the second or third waves of the pandemic. Despite the significant increase in the number of cases during the fall COVID-19 wave of 2020 and the summer and fall waves of 2021, the only major closures thereafter related to a return to remote learning for students.[20] After the introduction of the vaccine in the winter of 2021, the authorities focused on mass vaccination efforts. Collective immunity passports were developed for organizations that had a minimum of 60 percent of employees who were vaccinated. Such a passport allowed enterprises to keep working, regardless of the COVID-19 epidemiological situation (Rasporyazhenie 2021, Art. 8.6).
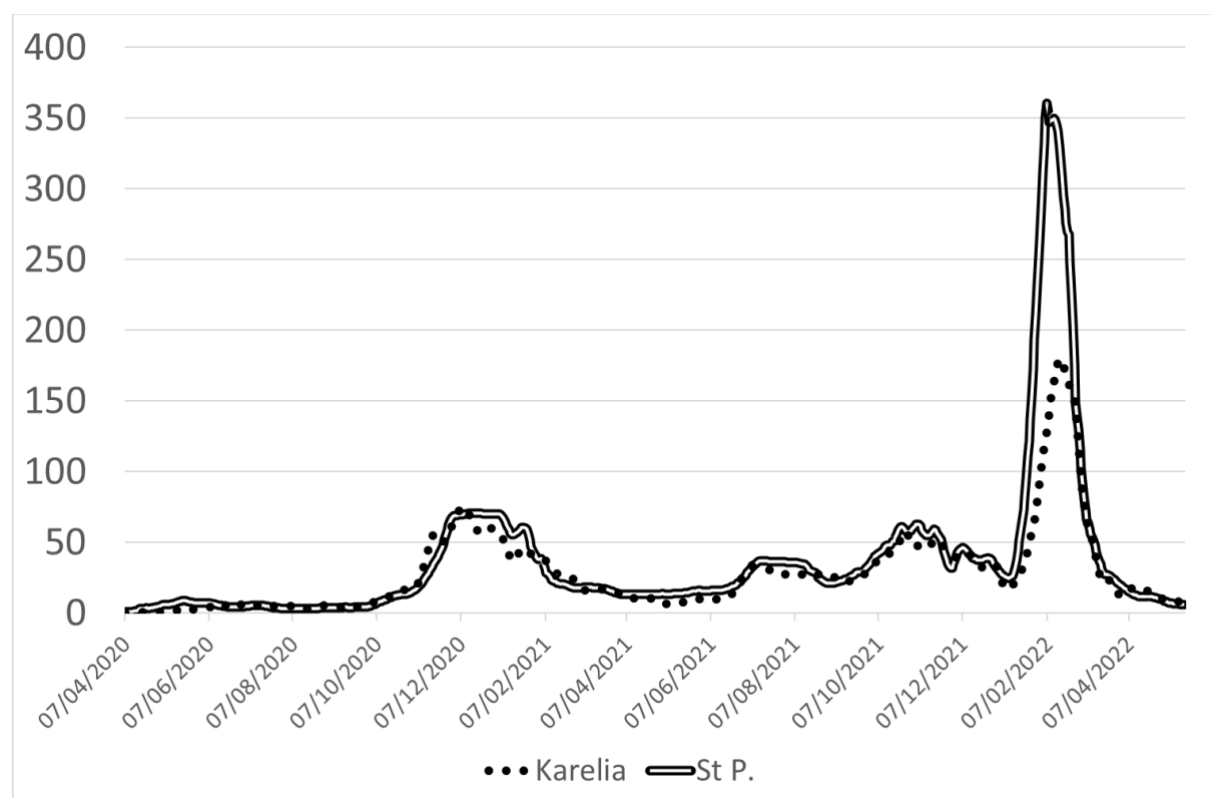
Meanwhile, in St. Petersburg, the local government demanded that state and municipal organizations achieve 65 percent vaccination rates among their employees, with the eventual goal of reaching 100 percent by September 1, 2021. Those who refused to be vaccinated for reasons other than medical necessity were subject to various penalties, up to and including suspension without salary (Postanovlenie 2021a). In the fall of 2021, during the next wave of the pandemic, St. Petersburg authorities introduced mandatory QR-code verification while

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[19] Among the measures of the St. Petersburg authorities were the prohibition on visiting parks, squares, playgrounds, and religious institutions. Failure to comply with this requirement brought a fine of 3,000 roubles (approximately 37 euros at the time of the exchange rate in the spring of 2020) (Postanovlenie 2020a).

[20] For COVID-19 statistics in Karelia during the whole pandemic, see Gogov.ru (2022).

visiting any public places. In late October, the authorities reinstated several of the restrictions that had existed in the spring of 2020 (Postanovlenie 2021b).

Figure 2: Number of positive cases per 100,000 people (seven-day retrospective rolling average), St. Petersburg and Karelia.

Source: authors' own recalculations based on raw data at https://russian-trade.com/coronavirus-russia/respublika-kareliya/ and https://russian-trade.com/coronavirus-russia/sankt-peterburg/

Though a cross-sectional analysis of the levels of restrictions in every region is not possible, the authors can hypothesize that, in regions with less restrictive regimes, there should have been greater satisfaction with the handling of the pandemic than in regions where the restrictions were more extensive. All other things being equal, the authors expected to see more approval of the authorities' actions in Petrozavodsk than in St. Petersburg.

Assessing the public response to regional restrictions

The differential trajectories of the two case studies gave the authors a chance to re-examine the hypotheses discussed in the all-Russian example with a more regional focus. In short, though the path of transmission was fairly similar in St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk, the trajectories of the restrictions differed. Taken together, the authors could, therefore, expect that the residents of Russia's second city may have been less satisfied with the authorities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the summer of 2021 than those in the Karelian capital. This expectation was made on the basis that the residents of Petrozavodsk had been subjected to more restrictions on their daily life and that this difference would primarily manifest itself in the attitudes to the regional authorities' responses (which differed) rather than the federal rules (which were uniform across the country). The counter-hypothesis would be that the public

would be more satisfied with the more restrictive regimes on the basis that they may feel that the authorities were taking greater measures to protect them.

The aforementioned national representative survey contained deepened representative samples in the two case study cities (N=300 in each location). It is thus possible to examine them against the background of the all-Russian picture. As Table 4 shows, the people of Petrozavodsk (where measures were slightly less restrictive after the initial phase) displayed higher levels of satisfaction with the authorities' responses than the residents of St. Petersburg (where there were several more lockdowns and closures). In both cases, people approved of the federal authorities more than the regional ones.

Overall, the number of people who thought the federal authorities' actions had been effective was roughly the same – 57 percent in St. Petersburg and 59 percent in Petrozavodsk, albeit with a higher proportion of residents in Petrozavodsk thinking that the government's response had been "very" effective. There was a slightly larger difference in attitudes toward the regional governments' responses. Only 8 percent considered the St. Petersburg city authorities to have handled the crisis "very effectively," compared with 17 percent of Petrozavodsk residents. At the other end of the spectrum, 49 percent of St. Petersburg residents (compared with 44 percent in Petrozavodsk) considered the response to have been "ineffective" to a greater or lesser extent. The mean values are not significantly different from each other. In both cases, approval ratings of the authorities' actions were slightly lower than in the Russian Federation as a whole – though the margin of error is slightly larger due to the smaller sample size. Notwithstanding the more vocal opposition to some of the measures in St. Petersburg, the more restrictive measures appear to have made only a small difference to the approval of the authorities' actions.

Table 4: "How do you assess the effectiveness of the federal authorities (president and the Russian government) and the regional authorities (head of the republic and government of the Republic of Karelia/ mayor and city government of St. Petersburg, respectively) in the fight against coronavirus?" (percent of respondents, excluding "don't know")

	Petrozavodsk		St. Petersburg	
	Federal	Regional	Federal	Regional
Very effective	22	17	12	8
Rather effective	37	39	45	43
Rather ineffective	29	28	24	30
Very ineffective	12	16	19	19
Total	100	100	100	100
N=	259	254	273	270

Source: Malmö University/Levada Center Survey 2021, q.17 and q.18 (regional extended samples only)

The authors could replicate the models above for the regions in the two case studies in relation to the respective regional governments in order to explore whether the trust in the regional government and the feelings of efficacy were the main contributors toward the public's support or otherwise for the regional authorities' actions.

Table 5: OLS regression, predictors of attitudes toward effectiveness of COVID-19 measures on the part of regional authorities (standardized Beta coefficients), region-specific samples

	Petrozavodsk		St. Petersburg	
	2a	2b	2a	2b
Adj.R^2	0.048	0.237	0.039	0.218
Sex	0.040	0.003	-0.007	0.003
Age	0.238**	0.194*	0.216**	0.218**
Education	-0.106	-0.107	-0.135*	-0.121
House size	0.060	0.060	-0.025	0.020
Family financial situation	-0.076	0.031	-0.132*	-0.085
Trust regional authorities		0.369**		0.422**
Influence on regional authorities		-0.185**		-0.064
Political interest		0.029		0.076
Reads regional newspapers		-0.014		0.016
Watches regional TV		-0.073		-0.034
Uses Internet		0.008		-0.012

The results from Petrozavodsk and St. Petersburg indicate a slightly different picture from the national one. Though trust in the relevant authorities remains the main significant predictor of a person's attitudes toward the pandemic, age has a much stronger effect as a significant predictive variable in St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk.

This perhaps indicates that in densely populated cities, rather than the smaller towns in which many Russians live, older people were more conscious of the risks associated with COVID-19. Around 80-85 percent of the Russian COVID-19-related deaths in the first year of the pandemic occurred amongst those over 60 (Bashkatova 2021) and there is evidence that this may have played a role. Re-running the regression analysis only for cities with a population of over 100,000 inhabitants indicated that age was a significant predictor of support for the authorities (older people were more likely to approve) at the $p < 0.01$ level, whereas it was not so for rural areas. This gives a preliminary indication, which could be the subject of future research, that older people in densely populated areas may have been more aware of (or afraid of) the risks arising from COVID-19 and hence more supportive of the authorities' attempts to combat it.

There is one further difference between St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk: the extent to which people's sense of efficacy played a role in conditioning their views on COVID-19. This variable is absent in the St. Petersburg case, which, as seen above, had more stringent restrictions for a longer period and in which there was some resistance to the restrictions around the time of New Year's and Christmas of 2020-21. Again, this perhaps gives a tentative indication that the public felt less able to influence the situation in St. Petersburg, where there were strict protocols put in place by the municipal authorities, than under the more lenient restrictions in Petrozavodsk. However, the explanatory factors between the two cases remain fairly similar. Trust in the authorities remains the overwhelming explanatory factor for supporting the pandemic measures in both cases – giving further evidence that there was a connection between generalized political trust and the perceived legitimacy of the response to the pandemic.

Conclusions

Much analysis of COVID-19 pandemic governance in Russia, be it in the media or academic/expert views, has focused on the most contradictory, dysfunctional, and negative elements: Putin's cynical 'blame game,' using the façade of decentralization and preparing regional governors as 'fall guys'; the chaotic interaction between competing institutions in pandemic governance; the manipulation of COVID-19 mortality statistics and state media propaganda's twisting of reality; the failure to provide economic support despite huge financial reserves; the bombastic vaccine diplomacy meanwhile low vaccination uptake at home made Russia vulnerable to new waves of the pandemic.

Yet, our findings suggest the popular majority do not see things in such a negative light. Rather than identifying a 'blame game' that was detrimental to Russia, it seems more natural to see 'blame diffusion' (or even 'credit diffusion') across the political system. In other words, many saw the various levels of governance as marching in unity according to one plan. The president and the governors were perceived as one team, albeit with Putin as the boss. This majority view was based on the relatively high levels of trust in the Russian state and the president as a leader. A minority (ranging between 15-30 percent) had lower trust in state institutions and more critical views of the president; this minority also took a more critical view of how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled, both by federal and regional authorities. This suggests regional authorities were broadly considered legitimate or illegitimate in accordance with how far the president is seen as such.

The findings indicate that although different regions took different approaches to deal with the public health crisis, the public did not necessarily perceive their actions as such. Returning to the broader question of Russia's regime type, the findings indicate that the 'social contract' of post-Soviet Russia remained an important explanatory factor, although there is a need for more qualitative verification of these attitudes. There was a strong connection between generalized trust in the authorities and how much the public approved of the restrictions. The authors of the article can speculate that this is because the public saw the state's role as one that ensured their safety rather than—as more oppositionist-minded people with less trust in the authorities might have regarded them—as measures that were tainted by association to authoritarian misgovernance, corruption, pompous patriotic rhetoric, or straightforward propaganda.

 A secondary factor was a sense of efficacy – indicating that people who felt that they had some influence over the instruments of the state were also more likely to approve of its actions at both the federal and the regional level. This again highlights the point that segments of Russian society were more confident in the state's basic abilities, accepted the state's claims more often than not, and saw their own role as citizens in more positive terms. Such attitudes were not obviously shaken by the adversities of the COVID-19 pandemic and reflect the core support base of the Russian political system.

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Appendix 1: Variables included in the OLS regression models

Inclusion in models **Model 1 (federal COVID response)/** **Model 2 (regional COVID response)**	Dimension	Question	Scale (Max/Min)
1	Dependent variable	How do you assess the effectiveness of the federal authorities in the fight against coronavirus?	4-point ascending (1= very ineffective; 4 = very effective)
2	Dependent variable 2	How do you assess the effectiveness of the regional authorities in the fight against coronavirus?	4-point ascending (1= very ineffective; 4 = very effective)
1	Trust	To what extent do you trust the Russian government?	7 point ascending (1=do not trust at all; 7= full trust)
2		To what extent do you trust the regional authorities in your region?	7 point ascending (1=do not trust at all; 7= full trust)
1	Efficacy	To what extent do you think people like you can have a direct influence on the actions of the federal authorities?	4-point descending (1= large extent; 4=not at all)
2		To what extent do you think people like you can have a direct influence on the actions of the regional authorities?	4-point descending (1= large extent; 4 = not at all)
1 & 2	Political interest	How interested are you in politics?	4-point descending (1= very interested; 4 = not at all)
1	Political information	How often do you i) Read all-Russian (federal) newspapers ii) Watch central television	4-point descending for each measure (1= regularly; 4= not at all).
1	Political information	How often do you i) Read regional, local newspapers ii) Watch regional, local television	4-point descending for each measure (1= regularly; 4= not at all).
1 & 2	Political information	How often do you use the Internet	4-point descending (1= regularly; 4= not at all).
1 & 2	Demographic	Sex	Binary 2-category (1= male, 2= female)

1 & 2		Age	5 ordinal categories, ascending (1= 18-29; 10-year brackets up to 5= 60+)
1 & 2		Education	6 ordinal categories, ascending
1 & 2		How many rooms in the apartment/house where you live	Numerical, ascending.
1 & 2		How would you assess your family's current financial situation?	5-point descending (1= very good, 5 = very bad)