

→ Mark your confusion.

→ Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)

→ Write a 250+ word response to the article.

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## Putin's Troubles

By *The Week* staff, October 25, 2020

*Holed up in his mansion, Russia's authoritarian leader is facing serious challenges both at home and abroad. Here's everything you need to know:*

### Why is Putin in trouble?

Russian President Vladimir Putin seemed to have achieved his wildest dream in the 2016 U.S. election, when the Russia-friendly Donald Trump narrowly won the presidency while benefiting from a concerted Kremlin campaign to hack and release Democratic emails and sow disinformation. Similar Russian interference helped bolster nationalist parties in Europe, including those that supported Britain's exit from the EU. While the former KGB agent succeeded in weakening Western democracies and dividing NATO, Russia itself has not materially benefited from his interference in other countries' politics. U.S. sanctions damaged the Russian economy and badly hurt the oligarchs on whom Putin depends. Over the past six months, plunging oil prices and coronavirus shutdowns have deepened the damage, leaving the Russian economy crippled. At home, a botched attempt on dissident Alexei Navalny's life has galvanized the opposition, while abroad, unrest in former Soviet countries — which Moscow considers its sphere of influence — is mounting.

### What unrest?

Moscow is worried about the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the ethnic-Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia has sizable minorities of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis, as well as a mutual defense pact with Armenia, while Turkey is openly supporting Azerbaijan. Putin has called for a cease-fire but has refused to get involved. In Kyrgyzstan, anti-government protesters last week toppled the pro-Russian president, Sooronbai Jeenbekov, just two weeks after Putin, in a rare in-person meeting, promised to "do everything to support you as head of state." Most threatening is the uprising in Belarus, a country that Russia is bound to in a nominal federal union. Putin's support for longtime President Alexander Lukashenko, accused of rigging his re-election, has alienated many Belarusians. Huge weekly protests against Lukashenko show no sign of letting up, and Putin's nightmare is that the protests could embolden his own opponents.

### Who are Putin's opponents?

In June, Russia changed its constitution to allow Putin, who has governed since 1999, the ability to run for two more terms — effectively making him a czar and abandoning all pretense of democracy. That amendment, Tatiana Stanovaya told *Foreign Policy*, signals a new era in Putin's rule that is "much more conservative, less tolerant, more repressive." The following month, Sergei Furgal, the popular governor of the far-eastern region of Khabarovsk, was arrested on politically motivated charges, and the region erupted in weeks of protest. Days later, Navalny released an investigative report on his blog detailing the corruption and vast wealth of Putin's envoy to the far-east regions, Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Trutnev, further inflaming anti-Kremlin sentiment there. That may have been the impetus for Putin to attempt to kill Navalny. On Aug. 20, the activist was poisoned with an even deadlier strain of the banned nerve agent Novichok that almost killed double agent Sergei Skripal in London in 2018.

### Why go after Navalny?

Russia has long been "a country where members of the opposition die violently," says Sam Greene, the director of the Russia Institute at King's College London. Navalny has been a particularly irritating and dangerous opponent. His popular blog and YouTube videos, slickly produced and wryly comical, have exposed in startling detail how top Kremlin officials, including Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, amassed vast wealth through corrupt dealings. Lately he has begun organizing strategies for "smart voting," helping the opposition solidify around whichever candidate has the best chance against the Kremlin. His

poisoning brought more EU sanctions, further hurting the economy.

How badly off is Russia's economy?

Western sanctions have erased more than 6 percent of Russian GDP since the 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. This year alone, the ruble has lost 20 percent of its value. Russia is largely dependent on oil and gas sales, and the plunge in global oil prices — exacerbated by a price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia — has cost it tens of billions in revenue. The pandemic is delivering another major blow. Putin lifted the country's shutdown in May, and the virus has spread rapidly, giving Russia the fourth-highest total of infections in the world. Poverty and hunger are widespread. "There is mounting internal discontent, to say the least, over the economy," economist Igor Nikolayev told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "I have the feeling that this is going to make authorities increasingly nervous, and the risk of a domestic crackdown is becoming greater."

### **What about the U.S. election?**

U.S. intelligence warns that Putin is again interfering on the side of Trump, using "a range of measures" to spread disinformation about Joe Biden and his son Hunter and to undermine confidence in the validity of the vote. Yet given the Democrat's lead in the polls, Moscow is also preparing for a Biden win. State TV openly mocks Trump as Putin's poodle, while Putin himself has begun extending overtures to Biden, praising him for supporting an extension of the New START arms treaty. That is "a very serious element," said Putin, "of our potential collaboration in the future."

### **The pandemic in Russia**

Infections are soaring in Russia, which now has more than 1.4 million cases and is adding some 15,000 a day. Officially, the death toll is 24,000 people, likely a severe undercount. Yet limits on gatherings are few, and schools have reopened. Masks and gloves are required on the Moscow subway, but shops and restaurants are open almost as usual, with workplaces instructed to require just 30 percent of employees to work remotely. Having failed to contain the virus, Russia is pinning its hopes on vaccines. It has already approved two different vaccines for large-scale trials and is using them before the trials have ended. Putin, meanwhile, is taking no chances. He has sequestered himself at his palatial mansion outside of Moscow and sees only visitors who have quarantined for at least two weeks. Even then, the Kremlin has said, everyone who is granted an audience with Putin must first pass through a "disinfection tunnel" that sprays visitors with a fine mist of chemicals.

### **Response option(s):**

- After reading the article, what is one main idea that you find most remarkable (meaning, "most worthy of a remark" -- so it can be interesting, concerning, confusing, alarming, offensive, etc)? What is it that you find so remarkable? Explain.
- After reading the article, what additional questions do you have? Research these on your own and write about what you find.
- Summarize any point made in the article and respond.