

# Coronavirus hits Russia as further news emerges of healthcare system in crisis

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As the coronavirus spreads globally, Russia announced its first case in its capital city. An individual who recently returned from Italy tested positive for the illness on March 1, about a week after coming back from a ski trip in the country's north. On February 27 he went to a local hospital reporting symptoms and was then transferred to an infectious disease unit in Moscow. The government is facing criticism for its handling of the case, as the man was initially placed in an open ward with other patients and only moved to isolation after a third test indicated he had contracted COVID-19.

Fellow passengers on his return flight to Russia have now been placed in at-home quarantine. In an indication of widespread fears over the virus, one such woman told the newspaper *Gazeta.ru* that the emergency medical personnel who came to her home to announce the quarantine described themselves as “dead men.”

Two Iranians traveling to Beijing and transiting via Moscow's airport have also now tested positive for COVID-19. Moscow schools are closing swimming pools and large-scale events. As of Monday, twenty-four people in Moscow were hospitalized after being diagnosed with COVID-19.

Other states in the former Soviet Union are also reporting new cases, including Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. The latter has now shuttered its schools and universities. In Ukraine, where a far-right government installed by the United States and Europe has ruled since 2014, violence erupted outside a sanatorium where Ukrainians from Wuhan, China were under quarantine. Protesters demanded they be driven out of the country. Twenty-five Ukrainians from the Diamond Princess cruise have refused to return to their country out of fear for their lives. Over 700 passengers

of the Diamond Princess cruise had been infected with COVID-19, and four have died so far.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that the situation in Russia is “entirely under control.” The country has already had a handful of cases among Chinese visitors and Russians returning from the Diamond Princess. All either recovered and have been released or remain in quarantine.

The Kremlin has responded to the spreading virus by closing borders, restricting travel, and promoting anti-Asian chauvinism. In February, Moscow sealed its 2,600-mile crossing with China. It has now placed restrictions on Chinese, Iranian, and South Koreans nationals entering the country. The government recently recommended that tour operators halt trips to these areas, as well as Italy. Train service between Moscow and Nice, France has been suspended. Russia is in the process of deporting 88 foreign nationals accused of violating quarantine rules, which were uncovered by tracking their movements with facial-recognition software.

News reports state that Moscow public transportation authorities are detaining individuals who “appear to be Chinese,” demanding their travel documents, alerting higher-ups, and even performing on-the-spot health checks. The only basis for doing so is individuals' appearance.

Russian citizens are being caught up in the profiling, as many Russians are ethnic minorities with an outwardly Asian appearance. Last week, Moscow police conducted raids on apartments, dormitories, and hotels where Chinese people were thought to be living. The city's mayor described the move as “unpleasant but necessary.”

In Yekaterinburg, a major industrial city in western Siberia, Cossack vigilante groups are “patrolling”

neighborhoods where many Chinese people reside and instructing those with coughs to go to the hospital and making others wear face masks.

These police-based measures have nothing to do with protecting ordinary people. Rather, they are aimed at channeling fear and social discontent into what the government perceives as the safe harbors of racism and Russian chauvinism, and away from criticism of itself and the country's wealthy, who will spare no expense on themselves should they fall ill.

For the masses of ordinary Russians, the coronavirus threat is hugely amplified by the deplorable state of the country's public health system and the toll taken by decades of low wages, unemployment, deindustrialization, poverty, and diseases of despair, such as alcoholism.

In a staggering report released just days ago, the federal government's own auditing agency found that nearly 33 percent of Russia's medical facilities for children lack a central water supply, 40 percent have no central heating, 52 percent have no hot water, 35 percent have no sewer systems, and 47 percent have no access for the physically disabled. Of the thousands of facilities investigated, 14 percent are physically dangerous. Outside of the major cities, there are not enough pediatricians and hospitals cannot provide even basic comfort to sick children.

A health system in such a state cannot treat the sick, much less prevent the spread of coronavirus. If large numbers of ill people begin pouring into such facilities, these dilapidated and under-resourced hospitals will become an accelerant for the spread of infection.

As a result of a combination of western sanctions and failed import-substitution policies, there is a severe shortage of medicines in Russia, including HIV drugs, which have been experimentally used to treat coronavirus in China and elsewhere.

Furthermore, thirty years of the restoration of capitalism has hammered away at the health of Russia's people. Life expectancy overall stands at just 70 years, with significant differences between men and women, the former of which are not expected to live beyond the age of 65. Alcohol consumption is among the highest in the world. Sixty percent of men and twenty-two percent of women smoke, making them particularly vulnerable to respiratory infections. On a per capita basis, Russians only trail behind Belarus in

terms of cigarette consumption. The country ranks ninth in the world in terms of deaths by cardiovascular disease.

An overriding concern of the Russian government, like that of the United States and other leading countries, is the impact of COVID-19 on the economy and the wealth of the ruling class. The Kremlin's minister of economic development declared last week that the virus has led to the depreciation of the ruble and a fall in the stock market. Trade with China is dropping by one billion rubles a day. The price of oil, a major source of revenue for the government, is also down. In his remarks insisting that everything is under control, President Putin claimed that the country's reserve funds are sizable enough to withstand a significant global downturn.

On March 2, the Russian ministry of finance sought once again to provide assurances by insisting that the government was fully capable of preventing the spread of infection and managing its economic fallout.



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