

Russia's coronavirus cases double in two days, as Ukraine reports first death

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Coronavirus cases in Russia have more than doubled since Wednesday of this week, bringing the total number of recorded infections in the country to 45 as of Friday evening. Neighboring Ukraine, where so far only a handful of people were reported to have contracted COVID-19, reported its first death from the disease yesterday.

The bulk of infections in Russia are concentrated in the country's main population centers—Moscow and Saint Petersburg—where officials have now banned large gatherings. Flights to Italy, Germany, France, and Spain are suspended, expanding travel restrictions already in place. Russia closed most of its border crossings with China two weeks ago and stopped issuing visas to Chinese, Iranian, South Korean, and Italian travelers.

Thus far, the government reports that all of Russia's coronavirus cases are among those who recently traveled to locations with a significant outbreak or have been in close touch with someone who has. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin credited the country's clampdown on travel with China for allegedly averting a large-scale outbreak. Despite efforts by Russian lawmakers to project the image that state policies have managed to protect the population, it is clear that they have not, and government officials anticipate community spread.

Three hospitals in Leningrad Oblast, which includes the city of Saint Petersburg and its environs, have been specifically designated to handle coronavirus victims. This week Moscow's mayor Sergei Sobyenin ordered the immediate building of a field hospital on the city's outskirts, with construction crews already breaking ground as they prepare to bring in prefabricated buildings and medical equipment and hook up a sanitation system. The school where a ten-year old girl

fell ill with COVID-19 has been shuttered. Rospotrebnadzor, the agency responsible for consumer rights and well-being, announced that people should avoid visiting public places at rush hour.

The government continues to promote anti-Asian chauvinism, deporting 100 Chinese students who allegedly violated their quarantine. Anticipating the need to use police state measures to control the spreading outbreaks, Moscow authorities threatened those who fail to follow government orders to self-isolate with five-year prison terms.

In an expression of the political tensions within the country, parliamentary member Sergei Katasonov of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) was sharply criticized for violating self-isolation after returning from travel abroad and attending a Duma session at which President Vladimir Putin spoke.

On Thursday, the media outlet *Lenta* featured the commentary of Doctor Pavel Brand, who warned that an "Italian scenario" would be "very bad" because Moscow alone has only enough ventilators for 1,500 to 2,000 people. It would need five to six times as many.

Ordinary Russians are already feeling the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. The value of the ruble has dropped to 75 rubles to the dollar, down from 63 a few weeks ago, despite government efforts to arrest the decline with large expenditures of foreign currency reserves. Prices for consumer items are rising as a result, under conditions in which family budgets are already strapped due to a steady drop in real incomes for several years.

Alexei Kudrin, a well-known liberal politician and former minister of finance with close ties to Putin, is predicting a rise in Russia's poverty levels. The country's target growth rate of 1.9 percent is

unachievable in the new global environment and the recent dramatic collapse in global oil prices once again threatens the state's budget, which needs the price of a barrel to be no less than \$40 to \$45 to avoid a crisis.

While neighboring Ukraine has thus far only reported three cases of COVID-19 and one death, the government has already sealed its borders to foreigners, closed all educational institutions for three weeks, and banned non-government events with upwards of 200 people. The right-wing government of Volodymyr Zelensky announced that it will devote 100 million Ukrainian hryvnia (\$3.8 million) to combat the disease, a totally inadequate amount in a country battered by years of IMF austerity, extreme levels of social inequality, and war.

The spread of coronavirus in Ukraine will be devastating. Average male life expectancy is just 67 years, according to the World Bank. 2012 data showed that the Ukrainian government spent less than \$300 per capita on public healthcare. A dramatic decline in public funding for healthcare has witnessed a sharp rise in out-of-pocket medical expenses and unmet needs. For twenty-three percent of households in 2015, those costs are characterized as either "impoverishing" or "catastrophic," according to the World Health Organization. An estimated 60 percent of the population live beneath the subsistence level.

Particularly vulnerable are the estimated 3.5 million people in Ukraine who are already in need of humanitarian assistance, a result of the six-year long civil war in East Ukraine that was provoked by the 2014 US-backed far-right coup in Kiev. About 1.4 million people are registered as internally displaced, most of them live in major cities like Donetsk, Luhansk, Kiev, and Kharkiv. A large number of them still don't have permanent residence and live in container homes.

Even when compared to other post-Soviet countries, Ukraine's health profile is disastrous. Its overall mortality rate is substantially higher. It has a particularly high rate of infections, parasites, and tuberculosis compared to other states. Since 2017, measles has infected 115,000 people.

The existence of ample hospital beds in the country is of little consequence because facilities have very little modern equipment. In the eastern region of Donbass, where the Ukrainian government is trying to suppress a

Russian-backed separatist movement, one-third of hospitals and clinics have been destroyed.



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