

Russia ends federal COVID-19 shutdown measures as it surges to second place in infections worldwide

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Over the last week, Russia has surged forward in terms of its number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, overtaking all other countries with the exception of the United States and Spain. Infections have been increasing for nearly two weeks at a rate of 10,000 to 11,000 a day. On Thursday, officials reported that this number slipped to just below 10,000 for the first time in 11 days.

With social anger building over the spread of the infection, unemployment, rising prices and collapsing incomes, there is an effort being made by state representatives to declare that Russia has gained control of the situation. The nation's chief doctor, Anna Popova, declared the two-week trend, followed by the one-day drop, shows that "we have stopped growth [of the virus] today."

Upwards of 250,000 people have contracted the disease in Russia so far and government officials continue to come down with the infection. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and Education Minister Valery Falkov are both ill, along with at least four other members of the cabinet, including Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin.

Hospitals and clinics continue to struggle with a lack of resources. In St. Petersburg, where there are just 5,483 COVID-19 hospital beds available for a population of 4.9 million, five virus victims suffered a horrible death this week when a ventilator being used to treat some of those in the ward exploded. It set the room ablaze, causing people to suffocate from the smoke. The faulty machine was new off the assembly line.

The Federal Biomedical Agency of Russia reported this week that it is finding new ways in which

COVID-19 manifests in patients, including inflammation of the abdominal cavity so severe that it requires surgery.

With the total number of infections now standing at 252,245 and deaths at 2,305, Russia's coronavirus mortality rate appears to be dramatically lower than that of other countries. It is unclear why this is the case. Using data reported by the country's health ministry, the *Financial Times* estimates that when excess deaths that have occurred during the COVID-19 outbreak are taken into account, the real number of victims may be 70 percent higher than official estimates.

Even with this adjustment, however, coronavirus is killing far fewer people in Russia than most other countries. The low count could also be due to the fact that the government has instructed officials to distinguish between deaths "caused by" COVID-19 and those that occurred "with" COVID-19. While there is a legitimacy to classifying the two groups separately because of the role that co-morbidities play in coronavirus deaths, the distinction makes it easier for officials to shunt victims into the "with" category.

If the Russian state is finding ways to "cook the books" with regards to its death rate, it is behaving like every other leading nation in the world, where the intentional underreporting of coronavirus cases and victims have accompanied a drive to "reopen" the economy and force people to return to work.

On Tuesday, the Kremlin ended the federal-level lockdown of Russia's economy and instructed local authorities to set their own mandates in terms of the shuttering of workplaces, social distancing and other measures. Nationwide entrance exams for universities, which had been postponed, may now take place on June

19.

On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the government would now be returning to its previous work. “All of our efforts over the last several weeks have been directed, above all, toward combating the coronavirus epidemic, on the preparation of immediate measures of support for the citizenry and economy. We will continue this and further work, of course. But I repeat—the situation is changing, and this gives us the chance once again to concentrate on questions of our current and long-term agenda,” he declared.

As the Kremlin presses forward with the reopening of the economy under unsafe conditions, it has announced another set of paltry social measures. Unemployed parents, including university students, will see their childcare allowance double, rising to 6,751 rubles a month (US\$91). All families with children ages 3 to 15 will receive a one-time payment of 10,000 rubles (US\$135) per child. Limitations on who is eligible for “maternity capital”—state support for families with more than one child—are also being relaxed.

In addition to tax relief for small and medium-sized enterprises and the self-employed, the bulk of the government’s latest measures are directed at creating mechanisms for bailing out big businesses under the guise of protecting workers. On June 1, an “employee support loan program” will kick in that is available to all companies in industries impacted by the pandemic. Government-backed credit, granted on highly favorable terms, is to be used to keep workers on the payrolls for six months. However, companies can still cut 10 to 20 percent of their workforce and be absolved of paying back anywhere from half to all of the loan. Furthermore, once the six-month period is over, there is no reason why firms cannot axe the remaining jobs.

The structure of the program is reminiscent of the recent bailout of the US airline industry, which has been given billions of dollars in return for keeping workers on the books through September. As the airline companies have made clear in numerous public statements, they are preparing for mass layoffs once the deadline expires.

The reality confronting the Russian working class found expression in comments this week by Labor Minister Anton Kotyakov, who described the “temporary unemployment” in the country—with well

over a million people having lost their jobs—as “not threatening.”

Meanwhile, the auto industry announced that it will be cutting shifts and positions due to a nearly 65 percent drop in car sales this year. Svetlana Misikhina of Moscow’s Higher School of Economics Development Center recently told *Gazeta.ru* that optimistically real incomes will fall this year for the population by 8.2 percent and pessimistically by 12.1 percent.

Many of the 440,000 medical workers in Russia mobilized to fight the coronavirus pandemic have still not seen the bonuses promised them by the government in March. The Kremlin blames regional governments for failing to fully disburse the funds. Apparently, one method used to chisel health care workers’ bonuses is to calculate how much they get based on how many minutes they are specifically devoting to COVID-19-related work.

One St. Petersburg surgeon explained to the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* that because she stopped work in the operating room and took on responsibilities associated with infectious-disease control, which in general is paid less overall than surgery, her paycheck shrank.



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