

Russian government issues mask mandate, opposes shutdown as COVID cases spike

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The Russian government announced a nationwide mask mandate on Tuesday in response to a sharp rise in coronavirus cases across the country. Anna Popova, head of the federal agency responsible for consumer rights and human wellbeing, declared that masks must now be worn in any location where people concentrate, including everywhere from public transportation to taxis, parks, and elevators. She also called for intensified efforts to disinfect public transportation and shopping and food service facilities. Local authorities were advised to shutter night clubs, bars, and restaurants between the hours of 11:00pm and 6:00am, even as the federal government made clear that it has no intention of ordering a life-saving shutdown of factories, workplaces, and schools.

As of October 28, Russia had added another 16,202 cases in a 24-hour period to its overall total of more than 1.5 million infections. For three weeks now, daily COVID-19 counts have been well above the peak previously reached in May. According to official estimates, just over 26,500 people in Russia have lost their lives to the pandemic. However, this number is widely viewed as a substantial undercount largely achieved by attributing deaths to other causes.

According to the “memorial list” assembled by an anonymous group, so far 779 healthcare workers have perished. There continue to be reports that the government has failed to either pay out promised bonuses to medical personnel battling the COVID-19 pandemic or compensate families who have lost their frontline workers.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov went into self-isolation on Tuesday due to exposure to a COVID-19-positive individual, as has the head of the ministry of health. A number of government officials at the regional level have now contracted the virus,

including the head of Irkutsk Oblast and the first deputy minister of Saratov Oblast.

The disease is hitting performing arts institutions, which were reopened over the summer with reckless indifference to the dangers posed to performers and staff and the public. One hundred twenty-four employees at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, the country’s premier opera and ballet, are infected with COVID-19. Ten actors at the Lensovet Academic Theater in Saint Petersburg are also sick. Despite this, at a government meeting to discuss arts and culture, Russian President Vladimir Putin indicated that there would be no move to shutter cultural institutions and insisted that a cap on capacity at 50 percent was reasonable and adequate.

Russia’s two major cities—Moscow and St. Petersburg—are being hit hard by the second wave of the virus. Moscow accounted for 5200 of the country’s new infections on Monday. Despite this, city authorities are refusing to order the closure of night clubs, bars, and restaurants, insisting that newly unveiled digital tracking software that alerts people by text message if they have been exposed to a known COVID case is enough to contain the spread.

In St. Petersburg, which added 700 cases on Monday, officials stated that infection rates are climbing among the young ages 7 to 14 years old and 15 to 17 years old. No doubt this is due to the reconvening of schools. Officials further warned that the city can expect no relief from the pandemic till the spring. A fourth doctor died this week from COVID at the city’s Elizavetinskaya hospital.

News of increasing infection rates among youth comes as the head of the Union of Pediatricians in Russia reported that scientists have found a 30 percent decline in the cognitive functioning of children infected

with the virus. Boys with severe cases also show a fall in sperm production.

The virus is continuing its spread in other regions of Russia. In the southwestern oblast of Rostov, which borders Ukraine, 1397 medical workers have contracted the disease. The region is now facing a severe shortage of emergency doctors and other personnel. A scandal erupted this week in the region's main city, Rostov-on-Don, when it was reported that 13 patients on ventilators at one of the central hospitals died due to a lack of oxygen. The heads of the health ministry and department of health have now resigned.

Horrifying images of bodies piled up in corridors and packed into overflowing rooms at the main morgue in Novokuznetsk, a city of about 500,000 in southwestern Siberia, have appeared on the internet. The medical worker who shot the video tells the viewer there are so many corpses "you can trip." In Sverdlovsk, a province in western Siberia, 78 percent of COVID-19 hospital beds are occupied.

Rural areas are also starting to show a rise in infections. As is the case elsewhere in the world, residents in these areas are particularly vulnerable because of the lack of a health care infrastructure, medical supplies, and adequate numbers of medical workers.

As the physical toll on the Russian population intensifies, the economic fallout from the pandemic continues to spread. Alexei Kudrin, chairman of the accounts chamber of the Russian Federation, has predicted a five percent drop in the country's GDP this year alone—a forecast that does not take into account the effects of the second wave of the virus. Analysts of the International Monetary Fund estimated that Russian GDP will decline by as much as 14 percent.

Economist Mikhail Delyagin recently reported that as of September 2020 Russian households had already experienced a 25 percent year-over-year decline in their disposable income. According to a recent report by Credit Suisse, the wealth of Russian families fell by 10.7 percent in the first half of the year, outpacing the decline experienced by households in Ukraine, Turkey, Colombia, Great Britain, and Chile.

Regional authorities around the country are reporting budget deficits, the combined effect of lost revenues due to the spring shutdown and increased expenses to manage the pandemic. In the region of Tyumen, there is

a 91 billion ruble (\$1.18 billion) deficit. In Novosibirsk, the government's budget shortfall is on pace to rise by 65 percent in 2021. In Irkutsk, government debt has increased by 36 percent since the start of 2020 and there are billions of rubles of unpaid accounts receivable.

At the same time, food and utility prices are rising. The cost of sugar is expected to grow due to a production shortfall. Experts are predicting price hikes for food in the lead up to the New Year holidays. In Voronezh, a city of just under one million in southwestern Russia, local officials announced that utility prices could increase by as much as 6.8 percent in 2021.



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