

Health minister warns: Ukraine on the verge of coronavirus “catastrophe”

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Ukraine is on the verge of a coronavirus “catastrophe,” according to its health minister. The country continues to report daily records of new infections with cases reaching over 10,000 for the first time this month since the start of the pandemic.

Speaking to parliament last week, health minister Maksym Stepanov warned that “the situation quickly turns from difficult to catastrophic. We need to prepare for the inevitable—it is impossible to easily pass the second wave.”

As cases have spiked in recent months, the Eastern European country of approximately 40 million has been forced to reintroduce limited lockdown measures that were eased in May after the initial rush of COVID-19 cases ebbed last spring.

Cases throughout the country have been steadily rising since September. In October, Stepanov stated that the government would enforce stricter lockdown measures if new cases rose to 11,000–15,000. According to Stepanov, Ukraine’s medical system would simply be unable to cope with a daily rate of 20,000 new infections, a rate it is quickly approaching as temperatures drop and people are forced to spend more time indoors.

Indicative of the country’s worsening state of COVID-19 infections, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced on Monday that he himself had tested positive for the virus and would be entering self-isolation. Zelensky’s wife spent several weeks in the hospital last June after contracting the virus.

Despite the deaths of nearly 9,000 Ukrainian citizens and a country on the verge of a medical “catastrophe,” Zelensky has publicly displayed an unserious attitude towards the pandemic. In June, he told the newspaper *Ukrainska Pravda* that he had considered purposely contracting the virus just to prove to people “it’s not

the plague.”

While the millionaire former television star Zelensky will undoubtedly receive the best medical care available, contracting the virus is deadly serious for the vast majority of working class Ukrainians who are forced to seek treatment from the country’s impoverished medical system.

Speaking to Bloomberg News last week, Pavlo Kovtomyuk, the head of the health care economics department at the Kyiv School of Economics, reported that despite being aware that the country may be hit with an influx of new cases come fall, little preparation had been carried out by the Zelensky government. “There was very little preparation to set up hospitals, equipment and to provide training for medical personnel ahead of the autumn wave,” Kovtomyuk noted. He added, “slow test processing makes it difficult to trace contacts and to properly isolate infected people.”

To make matters worse, Bloomberg reported that just 13 percent of the country’s \$2.3 billion coronavirus fund went to the Health Ministry for hospital equipment, testing and ventilators, while more than four times that was used for road construction and maintenance.

As a result of the influx of newly infected COVID-19 patients into an unprepared medical system, the nation’s hospital capacity has already reached 67.2 percent and there are currently no regions remaining in the country where capacity is below 50 percent.

With infection rates climbing, Ukrainian medical workers are already working under highly stressful conditions with limited resources.

This week, photos taken by a COVID-19 patient being treated for the virus near the eastern city of Kharkiv circulated on social media, highlighting the

horrid conditions of Ukrainian hospitals. According to the patient who sent the photos by cell phone to *Kupiansk News*, "... a nurse asked me for a syringe, because an old lady was in the next room and she injected her with the same syringe for 5 days until the needle bent. All because the old lady didn't have money for new syringes. The nurses received 6,000 syringes a month and there were not enough of them. We had one nurse for 60 people."

A large number of Ukrainian hospitals in rural areas have been forced to close in recent years due to the austerity measures introduced since the 2014 US-backed coup. As a result of the pro-market reforms first introduced by the former American-born health minister Ulyana Suprun, the country now finds itself lacking both hospitals and medical workers to deal with the pandemic.

Despite the rapidly worsening situation, the Ukrainian government has hesitated to enforce stricter measures so as not to endanger the country's worsening economy. On Wednesday, the government approved a nationwide quarantine that would only be effective on the weekend and will last until the end of the year.

In addition to the deteriorating medical situation, the pandemic has further impoverished what is already Europe's poorest country.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the pandemic is pushing the country into a deep recession and may force over 9 million Ukrainians into poverty. The report also noted that "more than 80 percent of households have lost income, and over 40 percent have at least one family member who has lost a job since the beginning of the pandemic."



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