

Excess deaths in Russia spike

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While Russia's official death toll from coronavirus stands at just over 55,000, recently released data from the country's statistical agency Rosstat reveal a sharp uptick in excess deaths since the start of this year. The real number of COVID-19 victims is likely at least double or triple that officially reported, if not more. October and November each posted record death rates.

Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova said on Monday that mortality in Russia increased by 13.8 percent during the first eleven months of 2020 as compared to the previous year. Of that increase, 81 percent "relates to COVID-19 and the consequences of COVID-19," she stated, adding that the figures still remain to be fully analyzed.

An examination of the Rosstat data conducted by Reuters found more than 240,000 excess deaths between April and November alone. The news agency writes, "Rosstat data, tallied by Reuters, showed that less than half the total number of such excess deaths - at 116,030 since the start of the pandemic in Russia in April - can be attributed directly to the coronavirus. This is still more than double the preliminary death toll figure reported on a daily, cumulative basis by the Russian government coronavirus crisis centre."

Other news outlets, such as the *Guardian*, maintain that Russia's COVID-19 deaths are closer to 186,000. Whatever the precise number contained in the Rosstat data, Golikova's remarks make clear that the Kremlin has been grossly understating the coronavirus death toll.

More than three million Russians have contracted COVID-19 since the outbreak started, with infection rates hovering between 25,000 and 29,000 a day for the past few weeks. On this basis, the government is insisting that the situation in the country has stabilized in most regions. Nonetheless, infections continue to climb in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, as well as cities in western and central Siberia, which have been

particularly hard hit by the virus.

On December 28, Golikova stated that the federal government did not order a second nationwide lockdown this fall because it was prepared for the second wave of the virus, making restrictions on work, school, and transportation unnecessary. The country's spiraling death rate proves this claim to be false.

In Saint Petersburg, with a population of nearly five million, just 8.7 percent of beds at medical facilities remain unoccupied. A local military hospital recently opened its doors to civilian patients in order to alleviate the burden on the city's overstretched healthcare system. Saint Petersburg's Lenexpo Exhibition Complex has been converted into a field hospital. Across the country, authorities are scrambling to add beds to handle the influx of COVID-19 patients.

Shopping and family gatherings happening during the New Year holiday are expected to increase infections. Without another lockdown, this spread will be exacerbated by the return to work and school in mid-January, when the vacation period comes to a close.

In early December, the country began mass inoculations with the Russian-developed Sputnik V vaccine. Despite the official fanfare that accompanied news of Sputnik V's registration in August, distribution of the vaccine has remained relatively slow. Thus far, 700,000 doses have been administered, with another 300,000 expected in the final days of 2020. Given that Sputnik V requires a two-dose regimen spread across two months, only a tiny percentage of the Russian population of 140 million people has been fully vaccinated—about 20,000 people, according to government sources.

An ongoing issue is the fact that Sputnik V was registered and approved for use prior to the completion of phase three trials—the final stage in the vaccine testing process—which are still underway. Opinion surveys show widespread concern within the

population over the safety of the vaccine. According to the Levada Center, 58 percent of respondents say they would not be willing to be inoculated with Sputnik V, with a third of those citing the fact that phase-three has not yet been completed and another third indicating concerns over side effects.

These poll results are similar to ones released in August when the vaccine was first announced, indicating that the government's efforts to convince the population of the safety of Sputnik V have fallen flat. According to a mid-December news report in the *Moscow Times*, the 70 inoculation points set up across the capital city are underutilized, with far fewer people coming in to receive the vaccine than the facilities can handle.

On Monday, Sputnik V was approved for use in individuals over the age of 60, and the government is making a renewed push to increase the share of the population that is inoculated. The Russian government has said that it aims to vaccinate seventy percent of the adult population by November 2021.

On December 27, echoing comments made earlier in the month by the country's defense ministry, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov decried attacks on Sputnik V by press outlets in countries with an anti-Russian agenda.

Major media in the US, such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, have taken advantage of the roll out of Sputnik V prior to the completion of phase three trials to press forward with their anti-Putin agenda. They do not care in the slightest about the health and wellbeing of the Russian people, millions of whom they know would perish in the war for which they are braying against Moscow.

Given the dangers involved in exposing the general population to a drug that has not been fully tested, the decision of the Russian government to approve and begin mass inoculations with Sputnik V speaks to a degree of desperation in the Kremlin in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. With popular anger mounting over its inept response to COVID-19 and failure to provide genuine financial relief to ordinary people, the Putin government evidently thought that registration of Sputnik V in August would give his administration a boost. Instead, it may be having the opposite effect.

It is unclear as to whether Sputnik V is dangerous. The UK-based firm AstraZeneca just signed a

memorandum of cooperation with the Russian government regarding the incorporation of elements of Sputnik V into AstraZeneca's own vaccine, in an effort to boost the latter's efficacy and extend the length of time for which the vaccine gives the recipient immunity. Joint trials will be conducted.

Numerous countries have signed contracts with Russia to buy Sputnik V, with Hungary and Argentina receiving doses and vaccine components this week.



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