

COVID cases rise in Russia as government fails to contain pandemic

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New COVID-19 cases are once again rising rapidly in Russia, as the Kremlin's effort to manage the pandemic through vaccinations flounders. Late last week the mayor of Moscow, where the outbreak is centered, announced a limited number of new restrictions to stem the crisis. Officials in Saint Petersburg, the country's second largest city, followed suit on Monday.

New infections in Russia climbed to 13,721 on June 14, a 50 percent increase compared to a week ago. Over the weekend they had hit more than 14,700, well above the peak witnessed at the onset of the pandemic and at a level not seen since February of this year. The recent spike brings the total number of officially recorded coronavirus cases in Russia to over 5.22 million.

More than half of the new cases are in Moscow and the surrounding area. Saint Petersburg, the Nizhny Novgorod Region and the Republic of Buryatia in southern Siberia have the next three largest concentrations. Russia's consumer and health safety watchdog, Rospotrebnadzor, reported last week that the young are a major source of new infections.

Earlier, case numbers had plateaued at between 8,500 and 9,500 new cases per day. Daily deaths have been hovering in the range of 300 to 400 for several months now, with a total of 270,000 people having succumbed to the disease, according to the federal statistics agency. However, according to estimates by the *Economist*, excess deaths in Russia from COVID-19 are more than five times those officially recorded.

As of Monday, employers in Moscow have been directed to switch their workers to remote work or place them on paid leave through June 19. Restaurants and bars in the capital must close by 11:00 p.m. Food courts, playgrounds and athletic fields are shuttered for the duration of the week. Masking is required in stores

and on public transit, and workplaces must make sure their employees mask. In Saint Petersburg, food and drinking establishments cannot serve customers in the wee hours of the night, food courts cannot operate, and some children's play spaces have to temporarily close.

These measures, set to be in place for just a week, will do little, if anything, to control the outbreak. In both of the country's major cities, where a total of more than 15 million people live, establishments can continue to serve food and drinks indoors 15 to 20 hours a day. In Saint Petersburg, the Euro 2021 football championship is continuing as scheduled. At the upcoming Poland-Slovakia game, more than 17,000 fans are expected.

More generally, as many workers are paid off the books, thousands of Muscovites will be unable to take a week off, when in reality it will likely be unpaid leave. With no official record of their employment, they have no recourse to recoup lost wages should their employer send them home and not pay them, despite the city government's orders. With payday loans reaching record highs and past due payments on them climbing by 20 percent compared to last year, according to the Central Bank, ordinary Russians are under immense pressure to work under any conditions.

In an expression of what government officials actually think is coming, medical facilities around Moscow have been instructed to make thousands of hospital beds available to COVID-19 patients.

Russia's vaccination rate is extremely low. Less than 13 percent of the population is fully inoculated, despite the fact that President Putin recently declared that the supplies exist to give one of the country's three vaccines—Sputnik V, EpiVac and KovVac—to the entire population.

According to the polling agency VTsIOM, while 60

percent of those surveyed believe vaccines are key to arresting the pandemic, only 17 percent had gotten a shot and just 38 percent said they would like to. Fully 42 percent said they did not intend to get vaccinated, with 24 percent of them citing lack of trust in the vaccines, worries that they have not been adequately researched or fears of side effects.

The Kremlin's rush to be the first country to create and authorize the use of a COVID-19 vaccine may have backfired. Rather than shoring up popular support and boosting confidence in the government's handling of the pandemic, in bringing Sputnik V to the market before the completion of stage three clinical trials, many in the country are skeptical about the vaccine's safety, even though a review by international medical experts published in the leading medical journal *The Lancet* has since declared it highly effective.

As this latest surge hits the country, concerns are growing about the circulation of the highly infectious Delta variant, as well as Russian variants of the disease. On Monday, the head of the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, Alexander Gintsburg, said that scientists are continuing to find specifically Russian-origin mutations of COVID-19. Government officials also just announced that doctors are seeing a shift in the infection's symptoms, which appear to be increasingly gastrointestinal in nature.

Speaking to the radio station Ekho Moskvyy radio a few days ago, the chief physician at Russia's leading infectious disease hospital, Denis Protsenko, said doctors are facing new challenges treating patients. "What is alarming is that there is a feeling that the virus is changing. In the recent period we're seeing a lack of success of treatments, such that it makes one think about the fact that over the last year and a half this virus has also changed its face, it has mutated."



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