

Russia reports a daily record of 820 COVID deaths as schools are set to reopen

Clara Weiss**27 August 2021**

The official number of COVID-19 deaths in Russia on Thursday was 820, more than at any other point in the pandemic. While daily new infections are slowly declining, the country is still recording over 19,000 new cases a day, almost all of them driven by the highly contagious Delta variant.

Cases have declined mostly in Moscow, long the center of the pandemic, where a spike in vaccination and more stringent public health measures at the beginning of the third wave helped curtail the spread.

The grim record comes as schools across the country are set to reopen on September 1, herding 17 million school children and thousands of teachers into what are largely dilapidated buildings that serve as vectors for the Delta variant. The Russian education minister Sergei Kravtsov announced that no social distancing measures or masks will be required on a federal level. There will also be no federal vaccine mandate for teachers. Regions have the authority to impose public health measures on their own and in some cases schools can issue their own mandates.

While some schools and regions are seeking to mandate vaccines to their staff, the trade unions, which fully support the reopening, are campaigning against any vaccine mandates. Many regions, including Moscow, have issued a requirement for at least 60 percent of the school staff to be vaccinated. The Russian vaccine, Sputnik V, is expected to be approved for children on September 15.

The criminal reopening of the schools in Russia mirrors reopenings across Europe, Latin America and the United States. It will inevitably lead to a renewed spike in cases and deaths, including among children who have suffered record rates of hospitalization and deaths from the Delta variant.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, the

Russian government is refusing to enforce even the most minimal public health measures, leaving it to regional jurisdictions to impose limited, if any, measures on an ad hoc basis. Major production facilities in the country have remained open for almost the entirety of the pandemic.

These policies have led, officially, to 179,000 deaths, but studies indicate that the real death toll may be higher by a factor of five. Dozens of patients have died because ventilators have gone up in flames and oxygen pipes have exploded in hospital buildings that run on decades-old equipment and have been systematically starved of funds. Almost 7 million people out of a population of 142 million have officially contracted the virus, no doubt an underestimate.

In a stark example of the open criminality of how businesses and the government handle the pandemic, the Russian airline Rossiya, a subsidiary of the state-owned Aeroflot, forced its flight attendants to report for work, even if they are sick, for the past month. This was under conditions where about a third of all flight attendants in Russia reported sick this summer, many of them because of COVID-19.

These criminal policies have had global implications. The recent Delta outbreak in China was triggered by a flight that came from Russia, which carried at least one infected passenger who infected the cleaning crew.

Russia is also about to hold parliamentary elections on September 19. Several parties, including the ruling United Russia party, have signed a memorandum according to which their candidates are not allowed to speak about COVID-19 or vaccinations, under the pretext that only medical experts could speak about these issues.

Vaccination rates in Russia remain extremely low, even though five Russian vaccines have now been

approved. Only 29 percent of the population have received at least one jab, mostly of Sputnik V, and only 24.5 percent are fully vaccinated. This is well below the 60 percent vaccination rate that the government aimed to reach by the fall, much less than in countries like China, the US or Western Europe, and even below the worldwide average of 25.1 percent. Over half the population have indicated in polls that they do not intend to get vaccinated.

Vaccine hesitancy is driven by great popular distrust in the Russian government and state. Both are associated with the rule of the criminal oligarchy that has emerged from the Stalinist-led destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991 and has engaged in major assaults on the living standards of the working class and endless lies.

For decades, particularly since 1991, there have also been state-backed, systematic attacks on science and a promotion of religion, various forms of pseudo-medicine and irrationalism. At the beginning of the pandemic, much as in countries like the US or Brazil, Russian government officials routinely ridiculed the virus, comparing it to the flu, and crazed representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church who declared the pandemic a hoax were paraded on the media.

While there have been fewer studies of Sputnik V than of other vaccines, all indicate a high efficiency of the drug. Several studies suggest that the vaccine was 91 to 97.6 percent effective in preventing severe illness and death in earlier variants of the virus. A new pre-print study, that has yet to be peer-reviewed, found that full vaccination with Sputnik V is also very effective against severe disease resulting from the Delta variant.

The study analyzed the outcomes for almost 14,000 COVID-19 patients in St. Petersburg during the third wave of the pandemic, when over 90 percent of cases were Delta cases. According to the study, adjusting for age and sex, the vaccine's effectiveness at preventing hospitalizations among those infected with COVID-19 was 81 percent. However, it was only 35 percent among those who had received just one jab of the vaccine 14 days prior. The Russian Health Ministry had previously indicated that Sputnik V is 83 percent effective against contracting the Delta variant.

Reports indicate that the WHO is planning to grant emergency use approval to Sputnik V this fall. While it

is not clear what has caused the delay in the granting of the authorization, according to *Nature* magazine, experts assume that concerns about possible side effects and the state of Russia's manufacturing sites play a role. For reasons that remain unclear, the documentation submitted by the Russian side is still incomplete, about one year after the Kremlin itself authorized the use of the vaccine ahead of the completion of the third phase of the trial.

Russia also struggles with the production of the vaccine. Like the Astra-Zeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, Sputnik V uses an engineered adenovirus (a family of viruses that cause only mild illness) as a mechanism for inserting the genetic code for the SARS-CoV2-spike protein into human cells. However, unlike the Astra-Zeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, the two Sputnik V jabs are based on two different adenoviruses to increase the vaccine's efficacy. This means that two effectively different drugs have to be produced for one full vaccination, often in two different facilities.

After decades in which the Soviet industrial and scientific infrastructure was systematically destroyed, Russia had only few pharmaceutical plants when the pandemic began and desperately scrambled to turn Soviet-era auto plants into vaccine manufacturing sites, with limited success. There is also an acute shortage of highly trained workers in biotechnology.

As a result, Russia has fallen significantly behind the production of the 1.6 billion doses that are so far contracted. Sputnik V has been approved in 69 countries and especially poorer countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia have bought the vaccine as an alternative to the Pfizer/Biontech and Moderna vaccines. However, according to a recent report by the Council of the Americas, by August 12, Russia had exported just under 20 million doses of Sputnik V to Latin America, out of at least 95 million doses that had been ordered by Argentina, Bolivia, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela.



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