

Ukraine on the verge of the fourth wave of the pandemic

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Last week, Ukraine's daily coronavirus-related deaths topped 100 for the first time since June, according to the country's health ministry. New infections likewise increased to over 6,000 for the first time since May 15 as the virus resurges in the impoverished Eastern European country of approximately 41 million. By comparison, in September 2020, the country reported just over 3,000 new cases, testifying to the fact that the global pandemic is far from concluded.

COVID-19 hospitalization rates similarly jumped 51 percent in just one week. The highly infectious Delta variant now accounts for over 70 percent of all new cases, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Over 58,000 have already died in Ukraine as a result of the pandemic, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, but the real number is undoubtedly higher. In the western L'viv region, reports have surfaced that people have been forced to bury COVID-19 victims in makeshift graves outside of their homes due to a lack of cemetery spaces.

While the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky has spent the entire summer attempting to receive the backing of Western imperialism for its provocative anti-Russia offensive to "retake Crimea," its pandemic policies are preparing the grounds for an even more catastrophic spread of the virus and further mass death.

This Monday, the government announced that it would extend a state of emergency until the end of the year and issued a "yellow" warning for the entire country, which does little more than limit mass events and mandates mask-wearing.

The resurgence of the virus was entirely predictable as the Ukrainian government had earlier lifted the most

lockdown restrictions in June with just 1.6 million vaccinated individuals. To date, just over ten percent of the country are vaccinated. The unvaccinated have accounted for over 98 percent of hospitalizations in the past three months, according to Deputy Minister of Health Igor Kuzin.

Throughout the summer the country enforced what it called an "adaptive lockdown" which allowed regional authorities to tighten or ease restrictions depending on the situation locally. In reality, such measures were totally inadequate and weakly enforced and permitted the Delta variant to enter the country unchecked.

Faced with a deteriorating situation, Prime Minister Denis Shmygal announced in early September that the government would be meeting to consider a return to stricter lockdown restrictions.

"The epidemiological situation in Ukraine is predicted to deteriorate ... we see a tendency towards an increase in hospitalizations of patients with COVID-19, but the situation is not critical," said Health Minister Viktor Lyashko. This statement flies in the face of reality: the country is heading into fall when respiratory infections typically rise and 4.2 million students are being herded back into school.

Shmygal also made clear that the government will attempt to use the already globally-failed strategy of vaccinating itself out of the pandemic.

Last week, the government announced it would be introducing vaccine "passports" that "will allow businesses such as cinemas, gyms, theatres and swimming pools to operate without social distancing requirements if all visitors and at least 80 percent of staff at the venues are at least partially vaccinated."

As the WSWS has reported, vaccinations alone will not stop the spread of COVID-19 and could potentially lead to even more dangerous and infectious variants of

the virus.

To make matters worse, in a reflection of the widespread distrust and disillusionment with the government and the country's medical infrastructure, a recent poll suggested that 56 percent of adult Ukrainians have no intention of receiving any COVID-19 vaccine.

Moreover, in comparison to wealthier Western countries, Ukraine has struggled to obtain vaccines and as of August had the largest share of the unvaccinated in all of Europe. The imperialist backers of the Kiev government have refused to provide it with any meaningful assistance in the effort to vaccinate the population.

Nevertheless, in a sign of its fealty to US imperialism, the country has refused to use the more readily available Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine. The vaccine's effectiveness was confirmed by data published in *Nature* magazine in July.

The country's ruling class has made clear it is aware of the deadly consequences of its policies. Speaking with the Agence France Presse, former deputy health minister and founder of the Centre for Public Health Analysis Pavlo Kovtonyuk, ominously declared that, "This wave will mostly likely be the deadliest."

Kovtonyuk also admitted that the country's underfunded and dilapidated hospitals were incapable of dealing with a fourth wave. "No matter how we prepare our hospitals, they will be overcrowded," Kovtonyuk admitted.

Medical workers throughout the pandemic in Ukraine have worked in desperate conditions with outdated and missing supplies. Exacerbating the situation, throughout the pandemic Ukrainian medical workers have often gone months without pay.

During the summer, a number of medical workers went on strike, demanding unpaid wages and COVID-19 hazard pay. While the country continues to see thousands of new cases a day, the National Health Service has illogically continued to cut hospital staff and wages.

In August, doctors and nurses in the eastern city of Kropyvnytskyi went on strike despite intimidation and threats of layoffs from hospital administration. Earlier in the month, 150 medical workers in the city of Valkov went on strike and blocked a major highway over unpaid wages.

Similar strikes took place throughout the summer in Kiev, L'viv, Sumy and Slovyansk and will likely spread as the fourth wave overflows hospitals and places medical workers in even more dangerous working conditions.



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