

Pandemic spirals out of control in Russia, as officials announce inadequate public health measures

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On Wednesday, Russian president Vladimir Putin declared October 30 to November 7 a non-working week with paid time off. Over the past month, Russia has continually set new daily records for covid-19 deaths and infections. With over 1,000 succumbing to the virus and 34,000 new cases being registered each day, Russia has the second highest daily death toll after the US and the third largest number of new infections in the world.

Even these horrific numbers are widely considered to be underestimates, and Putin himself urged regions on Wednesday not to underreport their cases. Russian medical scientists are already speaking about a “mega wave” that could last, with no significant reprieve, into the spring.

Putin made clear on Wednesday that the government has no intention of implementing any serious public health measures, declaring “We only have two ways to get through this — get sick or get vaccinated. But it’s better to get vaccinated. Why wait for an illness or its serious consequences?”

The miserable character of the Kremlin’s action is revealed by the fact that the week from October 30 through November 7 already included four days off because of national holidays. In other words, the government simply added another three days of vacation to a long-weekend. In addition, the start date of the “non-working” period is more than a week away, which gives the virus another eight days to consume ever-more victims.

There are many loopholes in the so-called “non-working week” declared by the Kremlin. While schools will close, the government order only “encourages” non-essential businesses to send their employees home while paying their salaries. Many will simply not follow the recommendations.

The mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyanin, announced on Thursday that because of a “historic peak” in infections in the capital, the “non-working” week measure will begin on October 28. In addition, 2.5 million unvaccinated residents who are over the age of 60 or immuno-compromised will

have to remain at home between October 25 and February 25, unless they are going to work, shopping, or for a walk. Companies in the country’s largest city must introduce remote work for at least 30 percent of their workforce. In the service sector, at least 80 percent of employees must be vaccinated. Concerts and other large public venues will remain open but only be accessible to people with a QR-code that confirms their vaccination status.

Other areas are introducing measures of their own, and reports from across the country indicate that schools are closing or sending kids “on vacation” because of outbreaks. Regions where the situation is particularly bad may introduce the restrictions earlier or extend them beyond November 7.

These limited measures will, at most, result in a temporary dip in infections and deaths.

Since the reopening of schools in September, when deaths were already at all-time highs due to a summer surge, the virus has spun completely out of control in a predominantly unvaccinated population and an environment without any serious mitigation measures. Country-wide, 87 percent of hospital beds are occupied, but in 40 regions, 90 or 95 percent are occupied. In many facilities, patients are already lying in the hallway and ICUs are packed across the country.

As in the US, Brazil and the UK, Russian pediatricians are reporting that children are being much harder hit by this wave of the virus, both because of the nature of the delta variant and the fact that kids are congregating in schools.

While the Kremlin does not publish any figures on child infections, figures from Moscow give an indication of the severity of the situation: As of October 19, out of 6308 people hospitalized, 10 percent were children. Out of these, 45 percent were between 7 and 14 years old, 19 percent were between 15 and 17, and about a third were under 6 years old.

Vaccination rates in Russia continue to be extremely low. Just about a third of the population is fully vaccinated, and roughly two thirds of the population have not received even

one jab of the vaccine. Less than 400,000 doses were distributed last week. At this rate, it would take over two months to get another 10 percent of the population vaccinated. More than half the population has repeatedly indicated it is not planning to get immunized.

Mask mandates, if they exist, and social distancing measures, go largely unenforced. Scenes of overcrowded subways with many people either without face coverings or wearing them incorrectly are commonplace in big cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Moreover, authorities only recommend wearing surgical masks, which are known to offer poor protection against the delta variant. The much more effective N95 masks are barely known in the population. Costing at least 100 rubles apiece (\$1.40), they are also too expensive for most working people, who can only spend an average of 698 rubles (about \$9.80) in a visit to a store. There are no disinfectants in many public spaces, and there has never been any effort to introduce any measures for contact tracing.

The current wave will significantly exacerbate what is already a staggering population decline.

Recent demographic data indicate that between September 2020 and August 2021, 2.36 million people died in Russia while only 1.4 million children were born, resulting in a population decline of nearly 1 million—an unprecedented drop outside of times of war. In the first 8 months of 2021, mortality rose by 18.5 percent. While the coronavirus has been a major driver of Russia's population loss, it comes on top of a long list of social ills that has been exacting a terrible toll on working people—poor medical care, desperate poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction and other health conditions that result from intense deprivation.

In recent weeks, Kremlin officials have been publicly denouncing the population, blaming it for the skyrocketing cases because of the low vaccination rates. These slanders must be rejected. Full responsibility for covid-19's mass death toll and infection rate lies with the capitalist oligarchy, which emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union three decades ago, and its response to the pandemic.

The outright criminality and constant lies of the government and oligarchy that it represents over the past decades are a major reason for the widespread distrust of the authorities, which, in many cases, lies behind people's reluctance to get vaccinated.

Distrust of the vaccine is further fueled by the fact that the World Health Organization has not yet approved Russia's Sputnik V. The vaccine was released late last summer before phase three drug trials had been completed. For reasons that remain unclear, Russia significantly delayed the submission of the full required documentation on the vaccine to the WHO. However, international medical journals such as *The*

Lancet have found that the vaccine is highly effective and has no significant side effects.

At the same time, Western-manufactured vaccines such as Pfizer, AstroZeneca or Moderna are not available in Russia. Those who can afford it —a tiny minority — are increasingly turning to travel to the EU to receive one.

The restoration of capitalism in the former USSR meant a systematic destruction of the Soviet Union's advanced public health system. Whatever hospitals remain today are often in dilapidated, even outright unhygienic conditions, with completely outdated equipment and an overworked and underpaid workforce. Even as the pandemic hit the country last year, the Kremlin imposed further cuts on health care spending.

This social counterrevolution was accompanied by the systematic promotion of attacks on science and various forms of political backwardness. The Russian Orthodox Church, historically a bulwark of the far-right and obscurantism, has been heavily promoted, including during the pandemic, when Church officials (as well as government officials) publicly ridiculed the virus and denounced any efforts to contain it.

The horrific situation in Russia is mirrored across Eastern Europe, with Romania reporting the highest mortality rate in the world and Ukraine the third highest number of deaths per day (495) and the fifth highest number of daily new cases, globally. An explosion in cases is also happening in Poland and the Baltic States. In Belarus, hospitals are overwhelmed.



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