

COVID-19 deaths and child infections continue to surge in Russia, Ukraine

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11 November 2021

Weeks into the latest surge of the pandemic in Eastern Europe, Russia and Ukraine continue to report record COVID-19 deaths on an almost daily basis. Both countries now have the highest daily death tolls after the United States, which is also heading into another spike in cases.

This week, Russia set several records in a row, with 1,239 people dying on Wednesday and 1,211 the day before. This brings the total number of official deaths to 250,454. While by far the highest number in Europe, this figure is widely acknowledged to be a vast undercount. The excess death toll in Russia has superseded 720,000 since the beginning of the pandemic and is expected to hit one million by the end of the year. Daily new cases continue to hover between 38,000 and 41,000 a day, more than during any previous wave.

According to Russia's Health Minister Mikhail Murashko, as of Wednesday, 258,000 people are hospitalized for COVID-19, and 1.335 million—out of a population of 140 million—are under medical supervision because they have been infected.

The country now uses 2,925 tons of medical oxygen per day, and at least 12 regions are currently experiencing oxygen shortages. Murashko also indicated that about 53 percent of the population have now received at least one shot of the vaccine, but millions did so only over the past few weeks and are not fully vaccinated yet. Only a bit over one-third of the population have received two jabs.

The numbers for child infections are particularly disturbing. Alexander Gorelov, the head of the National Scientific Society of Infectious Disease Specialists, revealed on Thursday that 11 percent of all COVID-19 cases are among children. This means that over 130,000 children are currently infected, more than twice as

many as the health minister indicated two weeks ago.

Gorelov also noted that among children, infants up to one year old, as well as children over seven years old, are getting infected most often. A medical expert earlier reported that 13.5 percent of all children who have gotten COVID-19 in Russia subsequently are suffering Long COVID symptoms, which can include severe neurological difficulties and the loss of several IQ points.

An untold number of children have died from the virus, with the Kremlin refusing to publish any statistics on child deaths. On Thursday, a newborn baby that had been infected by its mother three days after its birth tragically died in the city of Vladimir.

The high numbers of cases and deaths show that the “non-working week” from October 30 through November 7, during which schools and many businesses were shut down across the country, proved woefully inadequate to stem the spread. Despite the ongoing spike in deaths, the vast majority of regions, including the hotspots in Moscow and St. Petersburg, refused to extend the limited public health measures. Schools and businesses have fully reopened in almost all regions and only some colleges continue remote learning. Mask and vaccine mandates are imposed in a haphazard and chaotic manner with stark regional and local differences.

Conditions are thus rife for a further horrific spread, especially among children.

Deaths and child infections are also on the rise in neighboring Ukraine, which reported 24,747 new cases on Thursday. Of these, 1,550 were detected among children and 462 among health care workers. Over 800 people are now dying in the country almost every day.

The mayor of the capital Kiev, Vitaly Klichko, revealed earlier that 85 children had been hospitalized

in serious condition on Tuesday, more than ever before, with some as young as two years old. Four of them are in the ICU. Tuesday also saw the highest daily deaths yet in Ukraine, 833 people. Over 72,000 have now officially died from the virus, among them at least 42 children.

Even before deaths surged to the current peak, there were gruesome reports of people burying COVID-19 victims in their backyard because cemeteries had run out of space. As in Russia, Ukrainian hospitals are reportedly experiencing oxygen shortages. Only 18 percent of the country's 40 million citizens are vaccinated.

Governments in both countries are responding to the surge by blaming the population and declaring vaccination to be the key to resolving the crisis. The Russian government is now discussing a new law that would require proof of vaccination on public transportation, and many regions now are extending vaccine mandates. Ukraine is already requiring proof of vaccination in many areas of public life.

In a typical statement, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova said that "the degree to which the health care system gets stressed now completely depends on how you [citizens] conduct yourself" and on "preventive measures" like "vaccines."

In fact, while vaccines are an extremely important tool to combat the pandemic and protect the population—above all, from severe illness and death—even under conditions of a near complete vaccination of the population, the virus will still spread. Only a combination of mass vaccination, regular testing, contact tracing and the temporary closure of nonessential businesses, coordinated on a global level, can eliminate the virus.

Already, the effectiveness of the vaccines is undermined by the continued spread of the virus. Many countries, including in Eastern Europe, report a growing share of people who are fully vaccinated and nevertheless are hospitalized or die. In the Moscow region, 18 percent of those hospitalized have been vaccinated, and in Latvia, 40 percent of those who died on Thursday had been fully vaccinated.

The attempts by Russian and Ukrainian officials to blame the population and make the spread of the virus an issue of "individual choice" is above all aimed at

covering up the political and social reasons for the unfolding disaster. Conditions for the raging pandemic and the horrific death toll were created by the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy. The destruction of the Soviet Union was the culmination of decades of betrayals of the October Revolution by the Soviet bureaucracy and the suppression of the socialist alternative to Stalinism, which was represented by the Left Opposition and the Fourth International.

Capitalist restoration and unending austerity measures since the 1990s have devastated what was once one of the best health care systems in the world. The number of hospital beds in the country has been axed, and medical equipment is now so outdated that oxygen pipes burst and ventilators have gone up in flames. The medical staff is severely overworked and underpaid. Health care workers have also been among those worst-affected by infections and deaths from COVID-19.

The looting that accompanied capitalist restoration and the open criminality of the ruling oligarchies are also a principal reason why the vast majority of the working population have no trust whatsoever in the government. Across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, distrust of the authorities is cited as the prime reason for popular hesitancy to get vaccinated. An additional factor has been the systematic promotion by the state of irrational, religious and anti-scientific conceptions.

When the pandemic hit, the oligarchs in Russia and Ukraine followed the examples of the capitalist class in the US and Germany: Having responded far too late to the emergence of the virus, since spring 2020, they have refused to impose the necessary public health measures and reopened factories. The school reopening this fall has been a major driving factor behind the latest surge. It is through these policies that conditions for mass suffering and death and the further spread and mutation of the virus were created.



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