

Amid record deaths from COVID-19, Ukrainian president accuses Russia of planning a “coup”

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28 November 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage the health care systems of both Russia and Ukraine as Kiev and its NATO allies fuel military tensions with Russia.

On November 25, Ukraine reported 15,936 new cases. Throughout November the country has regularly reported record highs in both deaths and new cases, a testament to the criminal failure of the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky to take any serious measures to curtail, let alone stop, the spread of the virus in a largely unvaccinated population.

Last Tuesday, the country reported a record 838 deaths. Just two days later the country’s National Academy of Sciences reported that the peak of the country’s COVID-related mortality had passed between the dates of November 8 and November 12 and that the pandemic was now likely to decline.

However, with vaccination rates among the lowest in Europe and the spread of the new Omicron variant, it is likely that prognosis of a decline may turn out to be little more than wishful thinking. Just 21 percent of Ukraine’s population are vaccinated, and 96 percent of severe COVID-19 cases are among the unvaccinated, according to the Ministry of Health.

Doctors working in the country’s underfunded and dilapidated hospitals continue to deal with new cases and mass death.

“We are extinguishing the fire again. We are working as at the front, but our strength and capabilities are limited,” Doctor Oleksander Molchanov told the Associated Press in the southern city of Kakhova.

“The situation is only getting worse. Hospital beds are running out. There are more and more serious patients, and there is a lack of doctors and medical personnel.”

The situation has reached such a severe level that Kiev’s crematorium was working around the clock to keep up with the spike in daily cremations.

“To date, compared to the summer period, the number of cremations has doubled,” Andrey Yashchenko, a spokesman for the Kiev crematorium, told Euronews. “If during the summer there were on average 60 processions per day, there are now between 100 and 120,” Yashchenko reported.

Opposition to the vaccine has been promoted by the Orthodox priesthood and far-right elements who continue to spread lies of “micro-chipping” and other misinformation that is common worldwide among the right wing. On Wednesday, over 1,000 right-wing anti-vaccine protesters rallied in Kiev to denounce even the limited measures introduced by the Zelensky government.

“We are protesting against the compulsory vaccination and demanding (that the government cancel) restrictions,” said Mykola Kokhanivskyi, who is also the leader of the far-right OUN Volunteer movement.

The organization which Kokhanivskyi leads derives its name from the World War II-era Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), whose military component, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), was involved in the mass killing of Poles and Jews. Like other far-right formations, it has been systematically promoted by the Ukrainian government and ruling class, especially since the 2014 US-backed coup that toppled the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich.

Neighboring Russia also reported record deaths several days in a row two weeks ago. While the number

of deaths slightly declined last week, Russia still reports deaths in the 1,200s, more than during any previous wave of the virus. Case numbers have slowly been declining as well but still hover well over 33,000 every day.

As in Ukraine, vaccine misinformation has been spread by the country's Orthodox priesthood. The influence of the Church and the promotion of irrational and unscientific conceptions has been compounded by widespread distrust of authorities. As a result, less than 40 percent of the country's 146 million people have been vaccinated.

According to data from Johns Hopkins University, Russia has reported approximately 265,000 COVID-19 deaths while Ukraine has reported 89,307, although the true numbers for both countries are undoubtedly much higher, according to several independent analyses.

The *Financial Times* reported that there have been 753,000 excess deaths during the pandemic in Russia. Data from the Institute for Health and Metrics and Evaluation suggest that Ukraine's real COVID-19 death toll could be above 120,000.

The working class in Russia has also been hard hit by inflation, as prices for basic food staples have increased by over 10 percent and sometimes more, since the beginning of the year. The Russian ruble has devaluated significantly vis-à-vis the dollar in recent months, almost reaching 80 rubles per dollar. In Ukraine, the government has promised the IMF that it will eliminate gas price subsidies, putting many working-class Ukrainians at risk of losing heat this winter as gas prices continue to soar. Zelensky's approval ratings have already plummeted to just 24.7 percent in October.

This public health and social crisis is unfolding as the US and NATO are systematically fueling tensions over the almost eight-year-long civil war in East Ukraine between the Ukrainian army and pro-Russian separatists. Over the past few weeks, the US has sent several warships to the Black Sea, while claiming that Russia was planning an "invasion" of Ukraine.

Russia, which has been accused of amassing close to 100,000 troops near the Ukrainian border, continues to deny it is preparing for an invasion of Ukraine. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed such claims as "hysteria."

During a marathon press conference on Friday,

Ukrainian President Zelensky vowed that his country was ready for war while accusing Moscow of sponsoring a coup against him in early December. "There is a threat today that there will be war tomorrow. We are entirely prepared for an escalation," Zelensky ominously stated.

Zelensky stated, "I received information that a coup d'état will take place in our country on December 1-2." He accused Russia of having planned the coup against him and suggested that the Ukrainian billionaire oligarch Rinat Akhmetov was involved in the plot.

While being careful not to accuse Akhmetov directly, Zelensky stated, "I believe [Akhmetov] is being dragged into the war against Ukraine." Without providing any evidence or details, he said that the coup had a price tag of \$1 billion. Zelensky added, "It's not only intelligence that we have, it's also audio intercepts, where representatives of Ukraine, so to speak, discuss with representatives of Russia [about] Rinat Akhmetov's participation in the coup in Ukraine."

With a net worth of \$7.3 billion, Akhmetov is Ukraine's richest man and owns a number of media outlets, which have criticized Zelensky in recent weeks. Earlier this year, Zelensky shut down a number of media outlets associated with Viktor Medvedchuk, an oligarch and opposition politician with ties to the Kremlin, for supposedly spreading "Russian propaganda."

Akhmetov described Zelensky's accusation as "an absolute lie" and stated that he was for a "united Ukraine with the Crimea and my home region, Donbas." The Kremlin also rejected the claims, with press secretary Dmitry Peskov stating, "Russia never engages in such things. There have never been such plans."

On the same day of Zelensky's press conference, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg again publicly backed Ukraine, stating, "If Russia uses force against Ukraine, that will have costs, that would have consequences."



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