

Omicron case rates explode in Russia

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In a mirror image of the Omicron crisis gripping Europe and the United States, Russia is seeing its COVID-19 case rates skyrocket. Like the governments in Washington, Berlin, Paris and London, the Kremlin is doing nothing to contain the virus.

On Friday, the country registered another 98,040 infections over the previous 24-hour period, a number that Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov acknowledged that same day to be undoubtedly an undercount. Omicron has been detected in 74 of Russia's 82 regions, and the situation is getting worse in 32 of those.

Officially, coronavirus deaths in Russia now total 329,443. However, the country's main statistical agency, which also counts those who have technically died from a comorbidity, estimates the number to be many times higher. There have been more than 929,000 excess deaths since the onset of the pandemic. While daily fatalities have fallen to about half of what they were during the recent Delta surge, that number is expected to rise in coming weeks.

In an extraordinary expression of the impact of COVID-19 on the Russian population, Moscow State University researcher Vera Karpova told *Bloomberg* at the end of December that life expectancy in the country has fallen by three years due to COVID-19, wiping out a decade's worth of gains. President Vladimir Putin acknowledged the rise in mortality rates in his end-of-the-year remarks, describing it as a "geopolitical" as well as a "humanistic" problem, but offered no solution.

Currently Omicron is tearing through the under-17 population, with cases increasing among children by 14 times in comparison to two weeks ago. Fifteen percent of all newly recorded instances of the disease are now among kids.

In Moscow, child infections leapt from 2,000 to 28,000 in a seven-day period and hospitalization rose

tenfold. A three-week halt has been placed on non-emergency hospital treatments for children, apart from those with cancer and other life-threatening diseases that cannot be delayed. Overall, the number of people admitted to medical facilities due to COVID-19 in the country's capital is now close to what it was during the previous peak.

Alexander Gorelov of the Institute of Epidemiology, which is under the direction of Russia's consumer watchdog agency Rostrebnadzor, told *Gazeta.ru* this week that Omicron is especially dangerous for kids two to five years old because it attacks the upper respiratory system and can cause severe bronchitis. Symptoms can be as bad as those seen in adults.

Federal authorities have said that they will not order a nationwide shift to online learning, much less any other sort of lockdown. But across the country, schools are shuttering due to outbreaks, exposures and shortages of employees.

In Tambov, after infections increased by five times, regional authorities announced a cancellation of all K-12 classes from now till February 7. In Tyumen and Buryatia, in-person learning has been halted for two weeks. In Perm, where COVID-19 cases have doubled among children, schools shuttered on Thursday. In the city of Volgograd, home to just over 1 million people, 92 schools are closed. In Saint Petersburg, extra-curricular activities have been halted. In Tver, which has not ordered a universal shift to online learning, health officials are adding another 300 beds to the region's children's hospitals.

Some of these regions and others—Sverdlovsk, Kursk, and Nizhny Novogord, for instance—are also taking a handful of extremely limited mitigation measures, such as restricting the operations of drinking establishments, night clubs and restaurants. Moscow, however, with a population of 20 million in the city and surrounding region, is doing nothing. Mayor Sergei Sobyenin

declared this week that he would not shut down the city, but rather open up more hospital beds in the city. In other words, people can just get sick.

In doing so, Sobyenin is following the lead of the Kremlin, which has announced a similar response. Former Russian president and now deputy chairman of the Security Council Dmitri Medvedev said Friday, “There is no sense in a lockdown now, particularly under conditions of the appearance of new variants.” He admitted that such a measure, if put in place for just two weeks, would stop the spread of COVID-19, but claimed it was simply impossible to do.

Anna Popova, head of Rostrebnadzor, made clear the same day that the government is completely aware of the impact of ending mitigation measures. She noted that cases are spiraling out of control in those regions that were the earliest to roll back all restrictions, a fact which she described as “unfortunate.”

Anticipating a massive wave of sickness, the government has recruited 81,000 professors and students from medical schools, including those in the first years of their education, to provide care. In addition, it is investing 300 million rubles, about US\$3.85 million, in research into a vaccine suitable for 6- to 12-year-olds.

But it is already clear the vaccine-only approach, adopted in nearly all countries except China and a handful of other states in Asia, cannot contain the pandemic. Barely 50 percent of Russia’s population is vaccinated, and the vaccination rate, which ticked up during the Delta surge, is slowing again. The government just halted the production of more doses of EpiVacCorona, one of the country’s vaccines, due to lack of demand.

Alexander Ginzburg, director of Russia’s leading epidemiology research center, warned this week that new variants of the virus are on the horizon. Russia would need 80 percent of the population to have some degree of immunity due to vaccination and/or prior infection to arrest the spread of Omicron. Without this he explained that mutations would ultimately render Russia’s vaccines ineffective. Ginzburg added that Omicron is just as dangerous as Delta for the unvaccinated who are elderly or have chronic conditions.

The domestic crisis hitting Russia comes alongside a massive escalation of tensions with the US and NATO.

These are on the brink of erupting into armed conflict and drawing the world into World War III. Moscow has no answer to either disaster.

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred the US into ever-more reckless and mad policies directed against Russia as it seeks to convince the American population that the greatest threat it faces are the occupants of the Kremlin and not those of the White House. President Putin, who presides over a population that is opposed to war and terrified of both it and the ferocity of American aggression, cannot offer anything to 146 million people beleaguered by two years of sickness and death.



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