

COVID cases explode in Russia and Ukraine amid war crisis

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9 February 2022

As the imperialist powers are stepping up their war campaign against Russia over Ukraine, threatening the lives of millions, Omicron is ravaging the population in both countries, where almost each day brings a new record in case numbers.

On Wednesday, Russia for the first time reported over 183,000 cases, more than ten times the figure of a month ago. Saint Petersburg is now leading the country with over 19,000 reported new cases, followed by Moscow. Over 20,000 people are being hospitalized every day. The daily death toll is also climbing rapidly, reaching 669 on Wednesday.

In Ukraine, cases hit over 38,000, a bit less than Friday's record of over 43,000 cases, but still significantly more than during any previous wave. 250 people died, more than double the figure of 115 deaths on Monday.

The *Guardian* recently noted that the high number of cases could affect the fighting capacity of the Ukrainian military should a war break out. Two thousand four hundred of Ukraine's 150,000 land forces are officially infected, but the real number is likely much higher as testing occurs only sporadically before major social gatherings or if someone has symptoms. In the Russian and Ukrainian armies, vaccination rates are 95 and 99 percent respectively, much higher than among the general population where it stands only at about 50 percent in Russia and just over a third in Ukraine.

Under conditions where Omicron widely infects even those who are fully vaccinated or even boosted, the policies of both oligarchic governments have ensured that the population is left with almost no protection against infection.

As elsewhere, two years into the pandemic, neither Moscow nor Kiev have informed the population about the airborne transmission of the virus and only very few

people wear N95 masks, if they're wearing any masks at all. Mirroring the response of the imperialist powers to the pandemic, the oligarchies in both countries refuse to impose further lockdowns.

While the Kremlin transferred most of the government's work online weeks ago and has scheduled only three parliamentary sessions for this month, most workers are obliged to show up for work unless their employers grant them permission to work remotely, or until the virus forces their workplace to shut down.

Again mirroring the trends in Western Europe and the US, the Kremlin has been scrapping whatever few preventive measures have remained. As Omicron surged in the second half of January, the government reduced quarantine time from 14 to 7 days. Since Monday, people who have been sick with COVID for a week now have to return to work without even taking a PCR test showing whether they are positive or negative.

The situation facing children (and their parents) is particularly horrific. According to Russia's health minister, Mikhail Murashko, 20 percent of all new cases occur among children. This is almost twice as much as the official rate of about 11 percent during the peak of the Delta wave last fall. At the time, Russian officials acknowledged that 13.5 percent of all children who had been infected would go on to experience long COVID symptoms, which can be extremely debilitating and include headaches, various neurological symptoms and the loss of several IQ points.

Almost 12,000 children were hospitalized in Russia as of Tuesday—a 28 percent increase in a week. The Kremlin has never revealed any figures about how many children have died from COVID-19 so far, but their number must be in the hundreds, if not thousands.

The reasons for this mass infection are clear:

Although it has been well established for months that Omicron is affecting children much more than previous variants, schools remain open until the virus forces classrooms to shutter. The vaccination rate among children is minuscule, with just over 41,000 children over the age of 12 having received two shots, as of this week.

Two pediatricians from Saint Petersburg, Ruben Movsesyan and Igor Alexeyev, spoke to the press this week to express their serious concern about the significant growth in severe cases among children. Both doctors have observed a spike in cases of pediatric multisystem inflammatory syndrome, which affects the heart and can also involve intestinal lesions and kidney damage. Often the syndrome only occurs weeks after the initial infection.

Movsesyan, the head of Russia's Association of Heart Surgeons, told the *Peterburgskii Dnevnik*, "We're faced with a challenge for the pediatric system, for the whole health care system. When you add up the puzzles related to COVID-19 and complications related to blood clotting, to inflammatory reactions, it's scary. It's a new challenge that will be a big problem for us if we don't respond with new programs that can protect children from severe complications, which are often fatal to children's health.

"We need to take these maybe still isolated cases very seriously and bring treatment and rehabilitation programs for children after undergoing COVID-19 into the big complex of functional diagnostics and cardiological monitoring. We anticipate that there may be more such children [with multisystem inflammatory syndrome], and we need to be prepared to address these issues before surgical intervention becomes necessary. If we didn't talk about childhood in the pandemic before, we're definitely talking about it now."

The wave of infections and hospitalizations is hitting a heavily understaffed, exhausted, overwhelmed and underpaid medical workforce. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 by the Stalinist bureaucracy and capitalist restoration have had a particularly severe impact on the health care sector, and far-reaching cuts and austerity measures have continued under the Putin regime and into the pandemic.

The deplorable state of the health care system has no doubt been a major contributing factor to the staggering death toll of the pandemic, which officially stands at

over 336,000 in Russia—by far the largest in Europe—but excess deaths stand at over 929,000. In a particularly shocking indicator, life expectancy has declined by a staggering three years because of the pandemic.

In an initial expression of the social anger that has been accumulating among health care workers, the paramedics of a hospital in the Bashkiri region initiated an "Italian strike" several days ago. The workers, who are making just about 29,000 rubles a month (\$383), are demanding better pay and significantly better working conditions. In their statement, they said, "We are working under the most difficult conditions. ...We perform our duties conscientiously, but our professional pride does not allow us to watch our fellow citizens being deprived of emergency medical care. There is only one medic on the crew instead of two [that are required by law]! We are actually forced to violate the standards of medical care."

When three of the strikers were fired, the rest of the emergency workforce at the hospital recorded a video, demanding that their colleagues be reinstated. Otherwise, they warned, they would all leave their jobs.



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