

Russia ends COVID-19 restrictions in major cities

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Major cities in Russia are relaxing COVID-19 restrictions, even as cases and deaths surge around the globe. Authorities in Moscow and Saint Petersburg announced the policy changes this week on the grounds that a dip in the number of infections means that the situation in the country is improving and stabilizing. Inoculations with the Russian-made vaccines Sputnik V and EpiVacCorona, however, lag far behind initial targets, and a leading epidemiologist with Russia's federal agency for consumer rights just declared Friday that officials are predicting a new uptick in coronavirus cases.

On Monday, the capital city's schoolchildren were ushered back into classrooms. As of yesterday, colleges, sports clubs and gymnasiums, and other educational institutions were also authorized to reopen in the country's largest urban center. Mayor Sergei Sobyenin has further announced that museums, libraries, daycares, camps, theaters, concert halls, and performance venues can now operate at 50 percent capacity. On February 6, students will return en masse to Russia's universities after an extended holiday break.

Thus far, nearly 1 million Muscovites—about 8 percent of the city's population—have been infected with COVID-19, according to official data. Over the past two weeks, Moscow has continued to see between 2,000 and 4,000 new infections a day, a fall-off from peaks reached in December. Hospitalizations have also declined.

The very measures that are now being halted were the cause of this drop in infections and instances of severe illness. In short, the fact that the minimal public health efforts implemented by authorities actually had some effect is now being used to justify their elimination. Cases and deaths, which, according to official estimates

now stand at 12,690, will now rise once again.

Saint Petersburg, Russia's second-largest city, with a population of just under 5 million, is undertaking similar moves. As of January 23, public and private schools, arts and sports venues, gyms, daycares and other facilities for children can reopen. According to city officials, COVID-19 spread is now under control and 30 percent of hospital beds are available.

The relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions is occurring despite the fact that the more contagious UK variant of the virus was detected in Russia a month ago. More than 2 million have died worldwide, including 68,412 in Russia itself. In reality, this number is far higher because when an individual with a comorbidity dies in Russia from coronavirus, the person's death is frequently attributed to this concurrent condition. According to analyses made of recently released data by the federal statistical agency Rosstat, excess deaths in Russia last year were somewhere between 180,000 and 240,000.

News outlets continue to report findings by Russian doctors regarding the long-term impact of COVID-19 on patients, as well as previously unknown effects of the illness on the body. Dermatologists are seeing instances of rashes, a condition similar to frostbite in patients' hands and feet, and severe cracking on the lips and around the mouth region, which creates a pathway for other infections to enter the body. Others are witnessing ongoing gastrointestinal problems among coronavirus sufferers. One media report described the lengths that doctors have been going to in order to save the lives of patients with 100 percent lung damage, including pregnant women.

As it has been everywhere, the vaccine rollout in Russia is a debacle. By the end of January, the government expects that just 2.1 million doses of either

Sputnik V or EpiVacCorona will have been injected into people's arms. With more than 144 million people living in Russia, this amounts to a tiny fraction of the population, particularly as both vaccines require a two-dose regimen. It is nowhere near the 75 percent of the population that government officials estimate is required to secure more general immunity. And at this rate, it will be impossible to achieve this metric by November 2021, as previously promised by government officials.

According to an investigation conducted by the Saint Petersburg think tank Peterburgskaya Politika, vaccines are only widely available in Moscow and a few areas in the Far East. Forty-two regions have either no or very little supply. Production and distribution problems have been cited as the main cause. Nonetheless, President Vladimir Putin announced last week that a mass vaccination campaign would begin on January 18.

Reports also persist of reluctance within the population to get either Sputnik V or EpiVacCorona, as neither has gone through the final stage of safety trials normally required before approval. In December, the head of the union Uchitel (Teacher), which represents educators across several regions, stated that many school employees are afraid to get the vaccine. An opinion survey conducted late last year by the Levada Center found that 58 percent of the population was not willing to be inoculated, with most wanting to see further evidence of the vaccines' safety.

In Rostov-on-Don, a city of just over one million in southern Russia, doctors at one hospital staged a protest over being forced to receive the vaccine despite have being promised that they would be given a choice on the matter. They too cited safety concerns.

The economic impact of the pandemic for the year 2020 as a whole is just beginning to come into full focus. According to the latest news, Russia's federal deficit grew by 4.1 trillion rubles last year (\$54.45 billion), about 3.8 percent of gross domestic product.

In a particularly absurd moment that reveals the government's combined ignorance and indifference toward frontline workers, a dispute has emerged between two federal agencies over whether data show that health care workers' baseline wages rose or fell last year. The Ministry of Health insists they went up substantially across the board, whereas the Accounts Chamber reports that they went down by about 15

percent.



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