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NYT Defies Russia's Call to Retract Report on Coronavirus Deaths

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Russia only counts the deaths of coronavirus-positive patients toward its total if pathologists say the virus played a direct role in their deaths. **Sergei Bobylev / TASS**

The New York Times stands by its reporting on Russia's low coronavirus death figures and will not issue a retraction, the paper's vice president for communications Danielle Rhoades Ha told Russian state media Wednesday.

Russia's Foreign Ministry had demanded that NYT and the Financial Times retract reports, based on Moscow's own official mortality data showing a spike in deaths last month, that Russia could be undercounting its Covid-19 deaths. Ranking behind only the United States in infections, Russia places 18th in the world for mortality with 2,305 Covid-19 deaths as of Thursday.

Related article: Russia Is Boasting About Low Coronavirus Deaths. The Numbers Are Deceiving.

“We’re confident in the accuracy of our material based on data published by an official government agency and interviews with experts from state institutions,” Rhoades Ha told the state-run TASS news agency.

“None of the facts in our article are disputed,” she added.

Because Russia only counts the deaths of coronavirus-positive patients toward its total if pathologists say the virus played a direct role in their deaths, critics have long cast doubt on its low official numbers.

Moscow, the epicenter of Russia’s coronavirus outbreak, has also seen a low mortality rate compared to other world capitals since the start of the pandemic.

Preliminary data from the Moscow civil registry office showed almost 20% more fatalities in April 2020 than the average April mortality over the past decade. The data, first published by The Moscow Times on Sunday, suggests that the city’s excess deaths may be linked to coronavirus.

Moscow’s Health Department said Wednesday that more than 60% of deaths among Moscow’s coronavirus patients are not being counted toward the city’s official virus death toll because these patients died of other underlying causes. It also refuted claims that it was under-reporting its coronavirus deaths.

Moscow reported 639 deaths directly caused by Covid-19 in April, meaning about 1,597 coronavirus-positive patients died that month overall based on the Health Department's percentage.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Wednesday that Russian lawmakers had called on the ministry to strip NYT and FT of accreditation.

“It’s an extreme measure and not our practice,” Zakharova said.

“Further steps will depend on whether they publish retractions,” she warned.

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